

Made in the USA: the age of American imperialism – a weekly news review

[1:06 pm 12/11/2022](#)



Sarah Glynn

Yesterday, Europe commemorated the anniversary of the end of the Great War that was meant to end all wars. After over a century, and with humanity needing to work together more than ever to ensure its survival, the world is riven by warring imperial powers in much the same way as it was in 1914. Today's imperialists may talk about saving democracy, and the right to self-

determination, but scratch the surface, and the drive for power and riches is blatant.

The United States, which emerged as a dominant power out of the destruction of the Second World War and attained an almost world-wide hegemony with the collapse of the Soviet Union, has proved a massively disruptive and destructive imperial force. This is not to claim that America is intrinsically worse than other imperial powers, but they have been the most successful, and so have had the capacity to do the most damage. The hands of the CIA and of NATO can be found in every development of Kurdistan's bitter modern history.

Today, with their hegemony being challenged by China, the US is even more determined in their pursuit of power. The failure of pro-Trump candidates to win the predicted gains in this week's US mid-term elections may have slowed America's descent into right-wing populism, but it will also make it easier for America's aggressive foreign policy to continue unchecked.

The main vehicle for US imperialism is the North Atlantic Treaty Association, NATO, which was set up in 1949, at the start of the cold war, to oppose the Soviet Union and its allies, and has become simply a tool of US expansion. The US and NATO have intervened – covertly or overtly – in countries all around the world.

NATO presents itself as a guarantor of freedom and security and a promotor of democratic values, and has been very successful in gaining popular acceptance in member countries as something both benign and inevitable. But the values that it promotes have always been those of the United States government and its military-industrial complex, and NATO has never hesitated to destroy others' freedoms and democratic choices to serve US imperial interests. NATO's sixty plus years of destabilising actions are no longer a secret, but they need to be recognised by all those who want to see true freedom and democracy and real peace – especially now, with NATO's barely disguised role in Ukraine and their corrosive impact on Swedish democracy.

Turkey – strategically placed between East and West – became a valued member of NATO in 1952. Open and extensive US support for Turkey's armed forces was combined with covert support for secret networks of violent anti-communist, and generally anti-leftist, organisations, which NATO and the CIA developed across Europe. These "Counter-Guerrilla" organisations gave sustenance to the far-right and were involved in decades of political violence, including in political coups.

The US effectively helped the Turkish government and its CIA-backed secret state to shut down possibilities for leftist and oppositional movements to participate in constitutional politics; and when the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) took up arms, the US helped Turkey to carry out sweeping crackdowns that left tens of thousands of Kurds dead and millions displaced. The CIA led the international conspiracy that resulted in the capture of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, so putting a major stumbling block in the way of a peaceful solution for Turkey's persecuted Kurds and for Turkey itself.

Turkey's history of disrupted democracy and growing authoritarianism is a product of this US/NATO meddling. Alongside this, President Erdoğan is adept at using Turkey's strategic NATO membership as a shield to allow him to attack rights and freedoms with impunity, and as a stick to enforce his will.

Sweden and NATO

Sweden and Finland's rush to enter the NATO embrace has enabled Turkey, which, like every other NATO member, has a veto on new memberships, to attempt to force their will on the Nordic countries. Turkey is demanding, as their price for lifting their veto, that the two countries clamp down on the PKK and on all groups related to them – including the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northern Syria, which led the fight against ISIS. On the face of it, such actions would seem to have nothing to do with NATO's ethos; however, while not presented in such blunt terms, stifling freedoms and suppressing left groups has always been an integral part of NATO's repertoire.

It has been depressing to watch how Sweden, which has a long history of support for Kurdish freedoms and had shown support for the Syrian groups at the highest level, has been ready to abandon both the Kurds and their own country's carefully constructed edifice of rights and moral values. Last Saturday, the foreign minister of Sweden's new right-wing government promised to distance Sweden from the YPG and PYD in the interests of Sweden's relationship with Turkey and membership of NATO; and, on Tuesday, after he had been welcomed to Ankara by soldiers dressed up in Ottoman uniforms, Sweden's new prime minister assured Erdoğan that Sweden is ready and willing to concede to his wishes. However, the problem goes much deeper than the present Swedish government. The Nordics' memorandum with Turkey was signed by the previous social-democratic government, and includes the deliberately vague clause that "Finland and Sweden commit to prevent activities of the PKK and all other terrorist organisations and their extensions, as well as activities by individuals in affiliated and inspired groups or networks linked to these terrorist organisations."

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria responded to the Swedish foreign minister's statements by pointing out that when Sweden pursues their own interests, this "should not be at the expense of the peoples who are fighting against global terrorism that threatens the entire world." They observed that the YPG is supported by the (US-led) Global Coalition against ISIS, while Sweden's new position is "an acquiescence to Turkey, and makes Sweden look like a partner with the Turkish policies, which support ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra against our region."

For tactical reasons, the US has ended up supporting the YPG, so they have found themselves in a military alliance (though expressly not a political one) with organisations that follow Öcalan's philosophy and that are themselves under attack from NATO member Turkey. In an attempt to rationalise this, the US draws a line between the YPG and the PKK, in which the former are good and the latter bad. However, the terrorist listing of the PKK – by the United States, by Europe, by the UK – is itself a political act. It is a tool that allows Kurdish demands to be dismissed and criminalised and the Turkish

government to be appeased. It is not supported by legal definitions of terrorism, as proved in the Belgian courts. Belgium's Court of Cassation found that the PKK should be considered a non-state actor in a war and so subject to the laws of war, not a criminal entity subject to criminal law. But this ruling has not ended the listing in Belgium or other western countries. And, shocking as Sweden's actions may be, they are entirely consistent with the history of the organisation that Sweden is so desperate to join.

Turkey

Turkey's strategic importance for NATO – and also its role in keeping migrants out of Europe in another agreement that belies so-called European values of rights and freedoms – allows the Turkish government to act with impunity both at home and abroad. They have invaded and occupied parts of Syria and Iraq and promoted violent Islamist mercenaries, and each week the list grows longer of persecutions carried out by the Turkish state against its own citizens. All this is being carried out by a NATO state and other NATO states are doing nothing to stop them.

Pressure is growing for an independent investigation into repeated accusations of Turkish use of chemical weapons against the PKK's guerrillas in Iraq; however, this pressure continues to be ignored by the international organisations that have the power to make such an investigation happen, and even raising the issue is treated as a criminal offence by the Turkish government. The attempt by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) to bring the issue to the Turkish Parliament was disallowed, and Sezgin Tanrikulu, the MP from the Republican People's Party (CHP) who was reprimanded by his own party for a tweet promising to raise a parliamentary question about the allegations, is now being accused of "terror propaganda", with Ankara's Chief Public Prosecutor calling for his parliamentary immunity to be lifted so that he can be charged.

On Sunday, Marches for Humanity Against Chemical Weapons were planned for Silopi, near the Iraqi border, and for Istanbul. They were called by the HDP and a list of other political organisations and were met by a massive police and army presence that was determined to prevent people from coming

together and from carrying out their planned marches. Mezopotamya News Agency describes thousands of people converging on Silopi, with groups walking over hills and streams to avoid the roadblocks. Protestors chanted slogans and danced, and were attacked with water cannons, tear gas and plastic bullets. HDP MP, Nuran Imir, fainted when a plastic bullet hit her in the chest. Afterwards, police raided homes and took 31 people into detention. In Istanbul, protestors were encircled by lines of police, and eighty protestors were detained, hands cuffed behind their backs.

Another week brings another slew of reports on the worsening situation faced by Turkey's political prisoners. Some of the people given thirty-year prison sentences in the 1990s are reaching the end of their terms. One of these is Ömer Evsen, who was sent to ten different prisons, some far away from his family, and also lost his wife to a Turkish mortar attack when he was inside. Giving the example of an arbitrary eleven-days solitary confinement imposed for listening to the radio, which they had done before without problem, he commented "Now everything is punishment. Everything you say and everything you do is punished to break your will and to make you surrender. There is aggravated isolation in prisons. Even the means of communication have been eliminated."

Yesterday, sentences of up to 12 years were handed out in the trial of 22 lawyers from the Contemporary Lawyers Association, who, in the course of their work, defended critics of the government. This is the case in which Ebru Timtik went on hunger strike in 2020 to demand a fair trial, and lost her life. Ebru's sister, Barkın, was one of those sentenced to 12 years.

And six-year jail sentences have been given to another 22 people for membership of a terrorist organisation on the grounds that they are members of the Democratic Society Congress (DTK), the umbrella organisation for all the groups and parties that support the concept of independent self-organisation. This despite the fact that the DTK is not a banned organisation.

Other countries cannot ignore the politicisation of Turkey's judicial system completely. Turkey is a member of the Council of Europe, and the European

Court of Human Rights is the court of last resort for Turkey's human rights cases. This week the European Court ruled on the case of 13 imprisoned former HDP MPs, including the party's former co-chair, Figen Yüksekdağ, and found that their arrest in 2016 and subsequent detention not only violated their fundamental rights, but – as in the case of the HDP's other co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş – was also politically motivated. So, what happens next? Already, Turkey has refused to follow the court's rulings for the immediate release of Demirtaş and also of the philanthropist, Osman Kavala. The only leverage that the Council of Europe has, is to restrict an errant state's participation in Council bodies, and, if nothing else works, to evict them from the Council completely. The latter option means that future complainants would not even have the possibility of a European hearing, so sanctions on Turkey's role would be better – but to achieve this would be a long slow process. It would depend on the drive of the Council's Committee of Ministers – European foreign ministers who will not be keen to risk alienating Turkey.

Iran

American liberals have embraced the idea of the Iranian woman standing up for her rights, but little is said about America's central role in the evolution of modern Iran. If Turkey is internationally important for its location, Iran is important for its oil. In 1953, after Iran's elected government moved towards nationalisation of its oil wells, the CIA, along with British Intelligence, promoted a coup that handed power to the shah; and both the US and the UK continued to work closely with the shah until the end, despite the extreme brutality by which he maintained his autocratic regime. In 1979, when they reluctantly had to accept that the shah had to go, the United States helped ease the transition to Ayatollah Khomeini. Diplomatic cables record extensive engagement between the exiled cleric and the Carter Administration. Even before this, the Western establishment and its media had boosted Khomeini's importance at the expense of leftist movements that were playing vital roles in the revolution on the ground. Khomeini's dominance was assured by the misguided analysis done by the Iranian communists and other left parties, who believed they could work with Khomeini, but found that once he got into power, he turned around and massacred them.

There are important lessons in this history for today's Iranians, especially as, outside the Kurdish regions, radical political organisation with a clear alternative programme is largely lacking. Monarchists are still there, with their rose-tinted images of the old days, and the CIA will be ready to promote potential leaders who share their capitalist beliefs. But Iran is a country with big economic problems and inequalities as well as a lack of freedom. If the regime of the mullahs falls, Iran's revolutionaries need to be ready to push on and address these problems, and not be content with a mere change of leadership.

Whether the revolution will succeed this time, or be crushed like previous uprisings, is still unclear. The protests go on, and so does the crackdown – particularly in the Kurdish provinces and Baluchistan. Fears have been growing for the thousands of people arrested, especially since the Iranian parliament called, almost unanimously, for “decisive action” against the protestors, using language that some have interpreted as a call for death sentences.

Iraq

US intervention in Iraq is well known, though it goes way beyond the public face of the 1990-91 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion. The autonomy of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was made possible by the no-fly-zone instigated by the US, France, and the UK, and western powers continue to provide support for the business-friendly Kurdistan Regional Government, turning a blind eye to its endemic corruption. Under this Western patronage, two feudal political parties have been able to dominate the region's politics and compete for the spoils. Each have their own military forces, and tension between them is on the rise.

NATO is also involved in Iraq through Turkey, which has built military bases over a large part of the northern border area, and which holds economic and political sway over the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the dominant force in the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Kurdistan Regional authorities also refuse to discuss the allegations of Turkish use of chemical weapons in their area.

Syria

Syria was in the Soviet sphere of influence, so major US intervention there does not go back so far. In the ongoing civil war, after failing to provoke regime change through backing rebel groups that proved unreliable partners, the US chose to support the Kurds; but they insist that this is only a military arrangement for the fight against ISIS. US air cover and military hardware has allowed the Kurds to survive, but US support comes with big risks. It can be withdrawn any time to suit the US, and it brings pressures to conform to the mould of US capitalism.

In both Iran and Syria, and earlier in Iraq, the US has operated systems of sanctions that have had disastrous consequences for thousands of lives. Sanctions have dealt a deadly blow to a Syrian economy already ravaged by war and drought and by Turkey holding back river waters. In North and East Syria, Save the Children has reported a big rise in malnutrition.

Beyond formal politics

As today's review makes clear, imperialism has no time for morality or compassion. But this week has provided examples of acts of solidarity beyond formal politics. The German Medical Association has called for the release of the head of the Turkish Medical Association who was imprisoned for calling for an investigation into the allegations of chemical weapons use. International lawyers have also condemned the crackdown on those calling for an investigation, and have urged states to demand that the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons looks into the allegations; and a Belgian law firm, headed by a former Belgian president, has demanded an investigation by the United Nations. The French trade unions, Syndicale Solidaires and Syndicat National des Journalistes de France Télévisions, have protested the detention of Kurdish journalists in Turkey. German Kurdish activists displayed a banner protesting the use of chemical weapons at a boxing match and at a football game. And hundreds of women met for a conference in Berlin that brought together ideas and activists from the Kurdish women's movement with women activists from across the globe.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her website and follow her on Twitter