

On NATO's altar – a weekly news review

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“We do not support the expansionist policies of Russia or NATO led by the USA, which ignores the will of peoples... We are on the side of peace”. This quotation is from the statement put out by the Peoples’ Democratic Party and other members of the Democracy Alliance on 1 March. It serves as a reminder that NATO is far from the benign force that many like to imagine. Indeed, since this statement was made, the US and Britain appear to have abandoned all thought of a peace agreement, preferring to pour weapons into Ukraine in the hope of bringing Russia to its knees – never mind the death destruction and danger that this implies.

The extraordinary swing of support behind NATO in western countries is based around a carefully constructed image of NATO as standing up for a people under attack, and as preventing capitulation to bully-boy tactics. It was an image that never had any substance, but now Turkey is very publicly tearing it to shreds. News this week has been dominated by Turkey's veto on the NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland, and its exploitation of the situation to try and force the Nordic countries to join its war against the Kurds. In other words, Turkey is trying to use NATO to bully Sweden and Finland into attacking an oppressed people. Turkey has always used its NATO membership as a shield of impunity for its attacks on the Kurds, but this goes further. What happens now is still a matter of many column inches of speculation, but NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, has referred to the need to address Turkey's "security concerns"; and Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, had a very friendly meeting with U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, in New York on Wednesday, where they agreed to deepen cooperation on defence and counterterrorism, after which Çavuşoğlu reported that Blinken told him that he would convey Turkey's concerns to Sweden and Finland. The stage appears set for some form of Faustian pact.

Turkey's list of demands, which must be regarded as an initial bargaining position, began with demands for ending arms embargos brought in in response to Turkey's 2019 invasion into Syria; and demands for clamping down on the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and other Kurdish organisations, and for the extradition of over thirty individuals. Seventeen of these are alleged to be members of the PKK, with the rest alleged to be supporters of Fethullah Gülen, Erdoğan's erstwhile ally who is blamed for the 2016 coup attempt. By the end of Wednesday, Turkey's full list of demands had been revealed; and Turkey had blocked the decision to process the NATO applications. Turkey is also demanding readmittance into the F-35 fighter jet programme – from which it was expelled after buying Russian missiles – and enlargement and modernisation of its F16 fleet – for which there has been major resistance in the US Congress. And they are calling on Sweden and Finland to sever all ties with the Peoples Protection Units, YPG, in Syria, which Turkey refuses to differentiate from the PKK. The Turkish ambassador to Stockholm told the Financial Times that this last was the most important of

their demands, commenting, “They [Sweden] are claiming that this group is fighting with Daesh, but Daesh doesn’t exist any more.” Sadly, Daesh, or ISIS, not only still exists, but is thriving on the instability created by constant Turkish attacks. In addition, many former ISIS members have joined the groups that Turkey employs as mercenaries. Turkish demands to ban all activities by organisations that Turkey considers sympathetic to the PKK or YPG would raise serious legal and human rights issues.

Turkey’s main target is Sweden, which has better relations with its Kurdish community than most countries, though these have often been far from easy. In December 1984, Sweden was persuaded to declare the PKK a terrorist organisation – the first country to do so. When Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated in February 1986, blame was laid on the Kurds, who were said to be retaliating against this designation, although Palme had shown sympathy with the Kurdish cause. In June 2020, the murder case was closed, with the government declaring that a Swedish man who had died twenty years before was the main suspect. But by then huge damage had been done to the image of the Kurdish movement, in Sweden and beyond. This helped pave the way for Germany’s ban on the PKK in 1994 and their inclusion on a European Union terrorist list in 2002.

Nevertheless, Sweden’s social democratic tradition has enabled the growth of a strong Kurdish immigrant community with active cultural and political organisations, which currently boasts six Kurdish MPs. Swedish society has shown itself especially welcome to the Kurdish movement in Rojava and its resistance to ISIS, and Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, met with the Syrian Democratic Council’s Executive President, Ilham Ahmad during Turkey’s 2019 invasion. This week, the third conference of Syrian democratic opposition groups, including the Syrian Democratic Council, was hosted by the Olof Palme International Foundation in Stockholm.

Yesterday, Ann Linde put out a tweet that boasted of Sweden’s historic support for PKK listing – despite the growing movement for delisting, which is supported by the 27 MPs of the Swedish Left Party. Predictably, this tweet has pleased no one.

Finland has a much smaller Kurdish community, and Turkey has suggested Finland is more ready to accede to some of their demands, but NATO is considering both applications together. All parties are searching for a “compromise”, while the US has offered bilateral military support to the Nordic countries until this is achieved. The Swedish government owes its survival to the vote of Kurdish MP Amineh Kakabaveh, with whom they made an agreement last November to support the Kurds and especially to work with the self-government in Syria. Concessions to Turkey’s bullying could also cost them votes in next autumn’s election.

Beyond wanting the things they have demanded in themselves, President Erdoğan will be seeing this as an opportunity to present himself to a domestic audience as a strong leader of world importance, who cannot be ignored. He has adopted his usual blowhard style of diplomacy, labelling Sweden a “total terrorism centre, a nest of terrorism”. Turkish foreign relations have become a frequent hostage to domestic politics. The Interior Minister boasted just ten days ago, of information gained through illegally bugging a meeting at the German embassy in an attempt to discredit the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP).

Politics of hate in Jerusalem and Ankara

As Kurds face being sacrificed, again, for other people’s politics, the broader lack of concern shown for Kurdish oppression was made very clear last week, and parallels were drawn with the oppression of Palestinians. International powers allow both peoples to be oppressed with impunity, but Kurdish oppression hardly even registers for activist outrage.

On Friday 13th, Israeli police attacked the funeral of beloved Palestinian journalist, Shireen Abu Aqleh, who had been shot dead by Israeli forces while clearly marked as press. The police attack almost caused the pall-bearers to drop her coffin, and even produced disapproving tweets from the EU and the US; but, as Jalal Abukhater observed in the Guardian, “If you do that with the world’s gaze upon you, it is because you believe there will be no consequences.” Israel calculates that geopolitical considerations mean that the US and its allies will allow them to act with impunity.

Turkey can also count on impunity, and, in Turkey's case, most of the world is not even watching. Two days after Abu Aqleh's funeral in Jerusalem, Turkish police attacked the funeral convoy of Kurdish politician, Aysel Doğan. Doğan spent seventeen of her 69 years in prison for her political activities, and was only released in 2015 for health reasons. Police blocked the funeral convoy from taking Doğan's body to her home in Dersim, and when hundreds of mourners sat on the road in protest, the police attacked them with tear gas and water cannon. They only allowed close relatives into the cemetery.

This is far from the first time that Turkish police have attacked a funeral. In 2020, mourners were attacked at the funeral of imprisoned human rights lawyer, Ebru Timtik, who died after a 238 day hunger strike to demand a fair trial. In 2017, at the funeral of the mother of jailed politician and human rights lawyer, Aysel Tuğluk, police did not stop a fascist gang from preventing the burial and vandalising adjacent graves. It has been suggested that the trauma of this experience could have triggered Tuğluk's early-onset dementia.

And the attacks do not stop after burial. A new report catalogues Turkey's systematic destruction of PKK graves, detailing 122 known attacks on Kurdish cemeteries between September 2015 and April 2020, which completely destroyed at least 1644 graves and vandalised at least 2926. Two years ago, Halise Aksoy was sent the remains of her guerrilla son – killed three years earlier – in a box by post. Last week her home was raided by police.

World powers not only allows these attacks – they can make it difficult to protest them. Of all the countries that said 'never again' after the holocaust, Germany appeared to take the injunction most seriously. But their interpretation has been so literal and limited as to become the opposite of what was intended. Fear of anything that might be perceived as antisemitic has resulted in a hounding of anyone – even Jews – making political criticism of Israel, while other groups are not afforded protection. Berlin banned protests commemorated the Nakba – the forced exodus of Palestinians that accompanied the creation of the State of Israel – and on Nakba Day, last Sunday, anyone showing support by wearing a kufiya or Palestinian colours was violently rounded up.

Many Kurdish flags are banned in Germany, and the previous day Berlin police had used the presence of flags as an excuse to attack and tear gas demonstrators after a march and rally against Turkey's ongoing invasion into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Demonstrators have commented on the aggressive and provocative policing, including insults and threats from Turkish-origin policemen, who never should have been assigned to such a demonstration and were there despite previous warnings against their deployment at Kurdish events.

World silence

Official indifference to the Kurds on the part of world powers could not be more clearly demonstrated than by the refusal of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to fulfil its role without bias, and investigate the many accounts of the use of chemical weapons by Turkey against the Kurds in Iraq. On Tuesday, activists attempted to deliver a file of evidence collated by Morning Star journalist, Steve Sweeney, to their offices in The Hague, but the OPCW refused to accept it. Chemicals have been reported to have been used repeatedly against the PKK guerrillas in their mountain tunnels, and also against local villagers. Sweeney has spoken with affected villagers, and also with local doctors whose report diagnosing chemical attack was censored by the authorities. So long as there is no official confirmation of the attacks, they can be ignored, and many politicians are happy for the situation to remain this way. (For more, see my interview with Steve Sweeney for Medya News.)

Official indifference extends to the whole unreported war of which these attacks are part. In fact, worse than indifference. The United States and its allies are fully supportive of Turkey's attacks on the PKK, although the PKK has long been demanding peace negotiations. This makes these nations prepared to turn a blind eye to the brutal collateral damage of what can only be understood as an unprovoked invasion. Iraq has finally felt compelled to make a formal complaint over the invasion to the United Nations; but they have also done this in the past without result.

Alongside the ongoing war in Iraq's northern mountains, last week witnessed what is widely believed to have been a targeted assassination by the Turkish secret service (MIT). Zekî Mihemed Çelebi was a political refugee from North Kurdistan/Southeast Turkey and a well-known and respected figure. He was shot outside his restaurant in Sulemani. This follows two earlier murders of political refugees from North Kurdistan.

In Syria, world powers look the other way while, every day, Turkey defies the ceasefires that the US and Russia have agreed to supervise, bombarding Kurdish villages, and wiping out hopes of a peaceful future. Last week, a nomad woman and her four children were injured outside their tent close to a Russian base near Ain Issa, in an area where many displaced families have taken refuge. The hospital has not yet told the injured mother that her eldest son has been partially paralysed.

Other than produce the occasional report listing some of the many horrific abuses being carried out in areas under Turkish occupation, international organisations do nothing to stop the violence and devastation. The looting of these lands even extends to their ancient history, and this week saw another story about the complete destruction of an ancient archaeological site in Afrîn, which has been bulldozed in the search for sellable antiquities.

When it comes to, perhaps, the biggest attack on the land and its people, international authorities have hardly acknowledged that it is happening. Worsening drought, despite better than average spring rains, has forced the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to warn of an "imminent disaster that threatens the lives & livelihoods of more than 5 million people... who depend on the Euphrates River for drinking water, irrigation and electricity." Almost no one mentions Turkey's role in holding back the lion's share of the river water that should be entering the region.

In Syria, Turkey is a foreign aggressor and an occupier. But the Turkish government also treats the predominantly Kurdish lands within its borders as a colony, and the Kurds as a colonised people.

Parts of these lands are essentially war zones, where the Turkish army responds to the actions of Kurdish guerrillas with illegal mass punishment of the population. Villagers are banned from going to their villages, or are kept restricted to the vicinity of their homes and forced to sell their flocks. And mountain slopes are systematically stripped of their trees.

All these aggressions, Turkey justifies as dictated by their “legitimate security concerns”, just as it justifies its demands to extradite and imprison dissident journalists and politicians from Sweden.

On Sunday, people celebrated Kurdish Language Day, but for Turkish authorities this has been a time to ban Kurdish concerts and theatre. In the latest instalment of a crowded history of banned events, a concert by Kurdish-Alevi singer, Aynur Doğan, was cancelled by Derince District Municipality; “Don Kixot”, a play by Amed City Theatre, was cancelled by Çayırova District Municipality, and Muş Governor’s Office canceled a concert by the brothers Metin and Kemal Kahraman. A small silver lining was provided by the protest made by CHP MP, Nurhayat Altaca Kayışoğlu, in the Turkish Parliament, who made her point by singing in Kurdish: the more powerful for the fact that the CHP historically has been no friend of the Kurdish language.

Fighting back

I have spent most of this week’s review looking at the selfish unconcern of governments. This can only be challenged by a mass movement that brings on board activists and workers organisations, so this week it was good to see an additional small step in this direction being taken by British trade unions. Sixteen trade union leaders, including the leaders of Unite and the GMB and of the Scottish and Welsh Trade Union Congresses, have signed an open letter to the Turkish Ambassador in London, condemning Turkish aggression in Iraq and Syria, which they compare to Russia’s attack on Ukraine, and drawing on the example of Northern Ireland to urge a return to peace talks.

Finally, although it is difficult to be sure what is happening, we cannot forget the extraordinary resistance that is being shown by the guerrillas in the Iraqi mountains against massive assaults by the invading Turkish army. I hesitate

to reproduce unconfirmed reports of significant Turkish losses, but it is noticeable that Erdoğan has not been able to claim the game-changing victory that he is desperately seeking. A song produced by artists in Rojava catches the resistance spirit. Hey Zapê!