

# Neither Washington nor Moscow – a weekly news review

The war in Ukraine is both terrifyingly new and frighteningly familiar. As a clash, albeit indirect, between NATO and Putin's Russia, it is steering the world into uncharted territory. Whatever the outcome, it is already shaking up the world order and political balances, and nowhere will escape the reverberations. But, as noted last week, there is nothing new in the competition for control of other countries or the use of brute power to attempt to enforce that control.

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The different western response due to the fact that this aggression is taking place within Europe is shocking even for seasoned observers of politics. Kurds and others who have struggled to get the world to notice their oppression and the destruction of their cities, or who, as refugees, have been illegally and brutally turned back from Europe's fortified borders, are watching in disbelief as western governments and media take the Ukrainians to their heart. It is understandable that a war within Europe should cause Europeans especial alarm, but the politicians and journalists who state, without hesitation, that this time it is different because the victims are Europeans with fair hair and blue eyes, and not people from the Middle East where disorder is the norm, are just the tip of an iceberg of prejudice. In the mainstream narrative, the Ukrainians are "people like us", while Russia, despite embracing capitalism, is the old enemy that would destroy all that the west stands for. Governments, including in the UK, that persecuted people who went to fight alongside the Kurds against ISIS, have given clear support for their nationals to go and fight the Russians in Ukraine.

Even more dangerous than the racism is the portrayal of NATO as a harbinger of peace. Despite all the talk of freedom and democracy, the West, through NATO and international institutions such as the IMF, has been much more interventionist and aggressive in imposing its world view and ensuring its international dominance than Russia has ever been. The generally greater personal freedoms within western countries mask the devastating impact of Western-imposed systems in creating a grossly unequal and unsustainable world. While a victory for Putin would be an unacceptable victory for aggression, a victory for NATO would also be a bully's charter. Because NATO is many times more powerful and more ambitious for world domination, this could be even more destabilising.

We all learnt at school how the humiliation of Germany after the First World War created the conditions for the rise of Hitler. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West encouraged the pillage and destruction of the Russian economy, and they pulled Russia's neighbours into the Western orbit while continuing to regard Russia itself as an enemy. Putin is not another Hitler, but he is a ruthless autocrat ruling a country that sees its own ambitions threatened by Western imperialism. As early as 2008, he had warned that

Russia would not countenance Ukraine joining NATO. Future school children may learn about the role of the West, and especially of NATO, in creating the conditions for Russian aggression; however, for the moment, the heart-rending scenes of refugees fleeing as their towns are destroyed by the might of the Russian army, has led to the absurdity of many Western observers calling for peace with one breath and greater NATO intervention with the next.

In conditions of war, everyone comes under pressure to take sides, and those who criticize NATO are quickly accused of support for Putin and his war of aggression. However, there are still many people – though not nearly as many as there could be – whose analysis of the situation leads them to support neither Washington nor Moscow.

### **Staking positions**

The pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) recognize the war in Ukraine as "the latest phase in the struggle for supremacy between NATO & Russia". Along with allied left parties, they put out a statement calling for Turkish neutrality and describing the war as a capitalist struggle in which "the peoples are slaughtered for the interests of the energy and arms monopolies". At the same time, the HDP "firmly rejects Russia's military intervention" and they "stand with the peoples of Ukraine, who are facing great pains and costs" – "peoples" not government.

For the PKK, Duran Kalkan, interviewed by Medya Haber, criticised Russia's attacks on Ukraine as unacceptable, and also criticised NATO, Europe, the US, and all imperialism. And he criticized the Ukrainian government for their trust in the West that allowed the war to happen. Predictably, perhaps, a mis-translation of an out-of-context quote has been widely shared on twitter in an attempt to discredit the PKK and those who have shown support for the Kurds.

The position of the Turkish government, by contrast, could be described as "both Washington and Moscow". For a long time, Turkey has been attempting to play NATO and Russia off against each other, and they are still trying to do so. Louis Fishman, in Haaretz, argues that President Erdoğan has so far won

international support for his position, with NATO accepting it as making him a useful interlocutor with Moscow, but that his balancing act could “soon come under perhaps impossible strain”.

Turkey has given strong verbal support to Ukraine, as they also did at the time of Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014, and Erdoğan visited Kiev the day after Russia declared the independence of Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Turkey has now said it will implement the Montreux Convention (which gives them control over access to the Black Sea) to keep Russian ships that are not based in Black Sea ports out of Black Sea waters, and they claim that, even before this, they persuaded Russia to keep four ships away and not request passage. They have also sold drones to Ukraine, and have just sent them more. Not only is Ukraine providing another shop window for weapons that Turkey uses to carry out targeted assassinations in Syria and Iraq, and has exported, at great profit, to conflicts around the world, but, the drones are also winning Turkey uncritical support from Ukrainians and their friends. The Ukrainian Ground Forces have even shared a horribly catchy song in praise of the Bayraktar TB2.

At the same time, Turkey has not joined the rest of NATO in sanctioning Russia, and they abstained from the vote that suspended Russia from the Council of Europe

### **Impacts of war**

Whatever positions the Turkish government takes, they will not be able to escape all the economic impacts of the war. In fact, Bianet argues that Turkey is one of the countries that will be most affected. Turkey carries out a large amount of trade with Russia, and also a considerable quantity with Ukraine, and the general disruptions of war will severely affect this. In addition, Turkey cannot afford, economically speaking, to upset Russia, who they rely on for the gas that provides a large part of the country’s energy and the wheat that they need for their bread. Russia is also an important market for Turkish agricultural produce and other products, and almost a quarter of Turkey’s tourists come from Russia and the Ukraine.

New economic stresses are coming at a time when the country is already suffering high and growing inflation, with even the official rate now sitting at 54%. Looking just at the basic staple of bread, Turkey's currency crisis has made imported diesel and fertilizers unaffordable, so it is very difficult for them to attempt to reduce reliance on imported wheat. (The HDP has just proposed that the state subsidise diesel and fertilizers to encourage wheat production.)

More economic woes could further reduce support for Erdoğan, and also make it more likely that he will try and distract from this with another act of aggression across the border.

In Syria, which has already seen a drop in wheat and fuel imports as a result of the war, events in Ukraine are raising questions about possible future changes in power balances: about Russia's ability to maintain their existing level of involvement, and the opening this might give to a greater role for Iran; and about the futures of the non-collision agreement between Russia and the US, and of Russia's acquiescence to the Israeli air force bombing Iranian-linked groups. Israel, is avoiding doing anything that would alienate Russia, and even their criticism of the invasion has been described as "muted". It has been suggested that the implementation of the Montreux Convention could impact Russian forces in Syria more than in Ukraine.

Iraq, as well as Iran, abstained from Wednesday's United Nations vote condemning the Russian invasion.

### **Turkey's foreign interventions**

While most of the world criticises Russia for attempting to impose their will by force, other examples of lethal and illegal international bullying continue with little comment. Now is not a good time to try and alert international powers to brutalities being carried out with Ukraine, especially when the perpetrator is a NATO member, but the last two weeks have seen two important presentations on Turkey's foreign interventions.

On 22 February, the Centre for Kurdish Progress, in London, hosted an online meeting on the situation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, at which the Morning Star's foreign correspondent, Steve Sweeney, launched his report on Turkish war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons. Before Sweeney spoke, we heard from Kamaran Osman from the Christian Peacemaker Teams based in Silêmanî, and from Lindsey German of Stop the War, who stressed the importance of the Kurdish question and how little it is noticed in the UK. Osman described how Turkey's incursions into northern Iraq have grown since their first cross-border shelling in the 1980s. He concentrated on the impact on civilians, who have always been casualties of Turkey's war, but, who, since the end of the peace process in 2015, have been specifically targeted. Targeting civilians is a war crime. Local people told the Christian Peacemaker Teams that, rather than simply target PKK vehicles, Turkey was waiting until those vehicles were in civilian areas – and they gave examples. Osman described this as a deliberate message to the people of the area to regard the PKK presence as a threat to themselves. Most recently, Osman explained, Turkey has been following a policy aimed at clearing all local inhabitants from an increasingly broad area, and extending Turkish military control. Villagers are told that if they don't leave the area they will be targeted, and soldiers come in the night and set fire to their farms. Since August 2015, more than 150 villages have been completely emptied and more than 648 nearly so, while more than 109 civilians have been killed and more than 120 injured.

Sweeney emphasised that this should not be described as a Turkish war against the PKK, but as a NATO war against Kurds, in which global silence is a consequence of international complicity. The section of his report that looks at the use of chemical weapons is based on the personal testimony of people – mostly civilians – who are still very visibly suffering the consequences; also of doctors who have treated them and who were forced by the Kurdistan Democratic Party authorities – who are hand in glove with Turkey – to alter their report on what was happening, with threats of dismissal or much worse. Sweeney points out that Iraqi Kurdistan is a part of the world where people are already sadly familiar with the effects of chemical weapons. The victims' testimonies provide strong evidence, but the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons refuses all requests for the expert investigation needed

for definite proof. Sweeney also observed that Turkey's (and NATO's) war crimes aren't limited to the use of chemical weapons, They include bombing Maxmur refugee camp and a Şengal hospital, targeted assassinations, and making it impossible for the Yazidis who survived the ISIS genocide to return home.

The testimonies in the written report are very powerful, and very sad. The first begins: "Please Steve, thank you so much for coming. It is important the world hears our story. We are very frightened. We are being killed and attacked every day. If they find you here they will kill you. And if they know we have spoken to you they will kill us." These are from people crying out to be heard and for the world to take action, but, as Sweeney stressed, evidence alone will not force political change. This will only be achieved by the political power of a mass movement.

Next Friday, four men will go on trial in Bussels for the attempted assassination of two leading Kurds who were staying in the Kurdistan National Congress building in the centre of the city in 2017. On Tuesday, a press conference at Brussels Press Club discussed how this case should be understood as part of a coordinated policy of international assassinations pursued by the Turkish government, and how European authorities are turning a blind eye to conspiracies being carried out in their countries, and are impeding proper investigation. The defendants in next week's trial are accused not only of being members of a criminal gang, but also of participating in the activities of a "terrorist organisation"; however, despite a wealth of evidence of ties to Ankara, the prosecution will make no link between this "terrorist organisation" and the Turkish government. Involved lawyers also described obstructions in the French investigation into forces behind the assassinations of the three women activists in Paris in 2013; and they referenced the confession, which was never properly followed up, made by a man who claimed he had been contracted to murder an Austrian politician of Kurdish origin. Besides the men who were meant to have been murdered in a bloodbath in Brussels, we heard from journalists who were living under threat of assassination in Germany, where Turkey has a 55-name hit list.

## Turkey's home front

Meanwhile, Turkey continues its internal oppression through the courts. The long and predictable process to remove parliamentary immunity from HDP MP, Semra Güzel, has now concluded, and an investigation has been opened against her on charges of being a member of a terrorist organisation. That her immunity would be lifted was never in doubt because the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and their ultra-nationalist Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) allies have a majority in parliament; however, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) supported the removal of her immunity too. The case against Güzel is based on photographs taken in 2014, at the time of the peace negotiations with the PKK, when the government actively encouraged families to meet with their PKK children. Güzel, who was not then a member of any political party, took the opportunity to visit her guerrilla fiancé who she had met as a student and not seen for four or five years. Three years later he was killed in an ambush, and the photographs that were recently leaked to the press were found on his phone. Güzel was elected as an MP for the HDP in 2018, and the authorities made no mention of the photographs then. The suspicion is that their release now is designed to feed into the ongoing case to close the HDP completely. (The police raided Güzel's home yesterday evening, but she was not there to be arrested.)

CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, still talks about 'making amends' and healing Turkey's wounds, but the opposition alliance that the CHP dominates, and which has just drawn up a document for returning the country to parliamentary democracy, has shown no signs of wanting to include the HDP in their discussions. Kılıçdaroğlu has also told Fox TV that the alliance will nominate the chair of the İYİ (Good) Party, Meral Akşener, as their candidate for Prime Minister. Akşener and her party are a break away from the MHP and are another face of right-wing anti-Kurdish nationalism.

As we watch the fatal power struggles between Russia and NATO in Ukraine, the Middle East continues to remind us of the dangers left in the wake of NATO's disastrous interventions there. ISIS was last decade's existential



enemy, but they have not gone away, and this week produced a warning that they are now planning to attack the vast and dangerous al Hawl Camp in Northeast Syria, which houses captured ISIS women and children.

The strongest voices calling for a positive alternative to the world of capitalist imperialism are locked up in prison – in Imrali, of course, where Abdullah Öcalan has been incarcerated for 23 years, and also in Edirne F-Type Prison, where the HDP's former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, has been held for five years. But their ideas cannot be locked up, and these ideas continue to inspire.