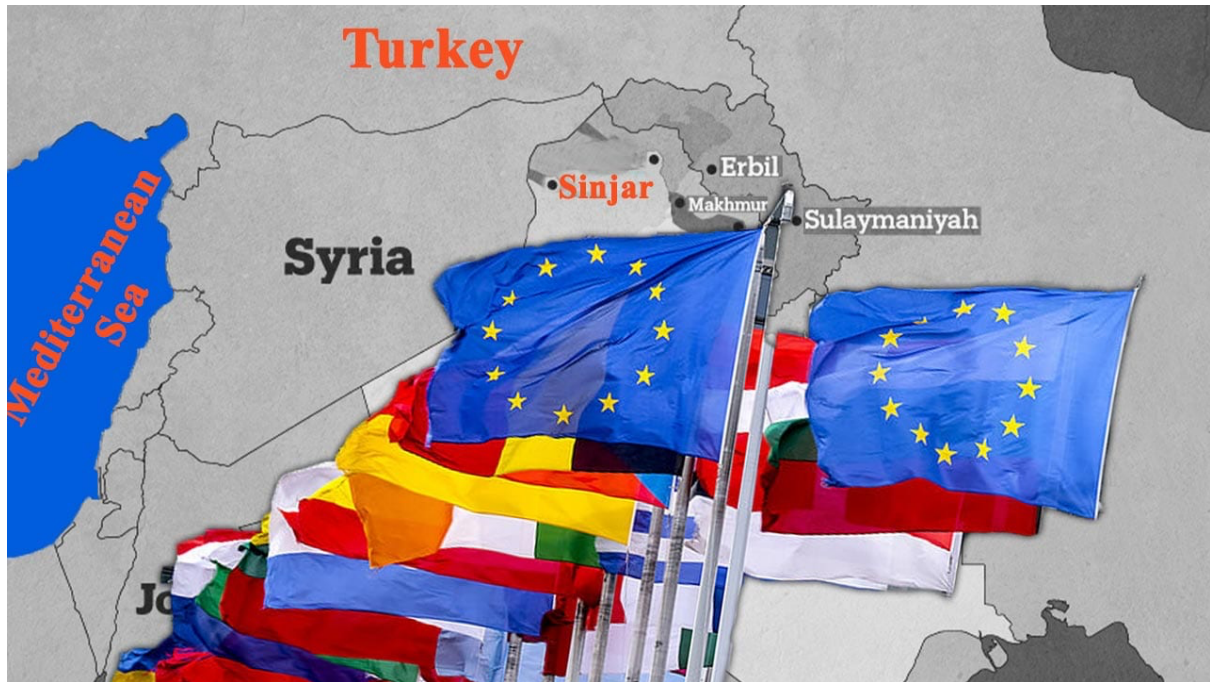


Last week in perspective

[4:07 pm 10/12/2020](#)



In the world of realpolitik, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's aggressive foreign policy isn't winning him many friends. This week, the European Union will debate imposing sanctions on Turkey in both the short and longer term, and Washington's draft Defence Spending Bill has brought United States (US) sanctions a step closer. President Donald Trump has said he will veto this, but he would need the support of Congress, and Erdoğan has come under heavy criticism from Republicans. Of course, neither of these proposed actions is a result of concern over Turkey's assault on the Kurds, or their continued crackdown on human rights and freedoms. This is all about international interests.



There has been controversy regarding Turkey's stance in the eastern Mediterranean

For the United States, Erdoğan's sin was his purchase, last year, of Russian ground to air missiles, in contravention of NATO rules and with implications for the continued efficacy of the US fighter-planes used by Turkey and other NATO members, which the Russian system was designed to combat. At last Tuesday's NATO conference, US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, also pulled up the Turkish Foreign Minister for the stand-off over access to gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, and for Turkey's use of Syrian mercenaries in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

For Europe, the principle source of concern comes from Turkey's claims to Eastern Mediterranean gas, though there are also increasing worries about Turkish support for the growth of intolerant and violent forms of Islamism within European countries themselves, as demonstrated by the recent votes for banning the Turkish fascist Grey Wolves. Most prominent among Turkey's European critics are Greece and Cyprus, for clear strategic and historical reasons, and also France, which combines its own power-wielding ambitions with strong criticism of Erdoğan. However, the crucial voice will be that of Germany, which has strong economic interests tied up in Turkey. Chancellor Merkel has been a frequent visitor to Ankara, and has shown herself reluctant to endanger German business ties in the past, but she has said, openly, that Turkey has not done enough to satisfy European fears this time. Turkey is

playing a high stakes game, with plans to carry out military exercises in Mediterranean waters even as the EU is meeting.

Sanctions

However, should we need a reminder of the slipperiness of international sanctions, a question in the Belgian parliament this week produced an acknowledgement that Belgian companies were making use of a loophole in recent arms embargo legislation to continue to supply parts for planes that Turkey has been using to transfer arms and mercenaries to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.

By contrast, and in line with arguments that stress the need for grassroots action that doesn't rely on international powers, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Volkswagen has just acknowledged that their decision to go back on plans to set up a \$1.1 billion plant in Turkey was a response to the organised protests of Volkswagen workers.

Of course, it is important that any boycott actions that are decided on are targeted to impact the Turkish government and its key players, rather than causing general hardship to the population – not least since that hardship could be used as propaganda in support of Turkish nationalism.

Actually, the new US Special Envoy for Syria, Joel Rayburn, did tell the Rojava Information Centre that they were 'ready to use... things like sanctions' to help preserve the ceasefire in Syria. But he seems pretty relaxed about Turkey's daily breaches of that agreement, which have increased significantly in the last two weeks; and the ceasefire also accords with US interests.



Sinjar's status remains uncertain

Sinjar

The most immediate focus of concern for the Kurdish freedom movement – as evidenced by demonstrations in various European cities – continues to be the agreement, brokered by the US, for the administration and protection of the predominantly Yazidi area of Sinjar to be taken over jointly by the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Sinjar's own autonomous-administration, painstakingly built up after the liberation from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), was not consulted, and was expected to dissolve. Protests by the autonomous administration and its supporters have ensured that the Yazidi's own asayesh, or local security forces, have been left in place for now, but discussions on future arrangements are still ongoing.

The Yazidis are most concerned about potential involvement of peshmerga forces attached to the KDP because these have worked closely with Turkey; however, so far, the forces in Sinjar have all been attached to the federal government. Not that this provides any long-term guarantee of security. The Iraqi government is corrupt and insecure and facing widespread protests, and there is no knowing what next year's elections may bring. For an agreement that is presented as bringing security, this is pretty inauspicious.



Caption: Recent protests in Sulaymaniyah over delays in wages and government corruption.

Protests

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is insecure too – at loggerheads with Baghdad and heavily reliant on Turkey, with whom, despite Turkey's persecution of Kurds and Kurdish identity, they have a fifty-year oil deal. The brunt of the long-running feud between the KRG and Baghdad over oil revenues and budget share has been taken by the KRG's public-sector workers, who have repeatedly suffered delayed and reduced wages. Last week, protests in Slemani (Sulaymaniyah) were met with teargas and other police brutality (the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – the KDP's government partner and rival, who control Slemani – have since tried to distance themselves from the actions of their own forces). The KRG has promised to borrow money to pay 79% wages for the last two months, but anger is rising against the perpetual delays and underpayment and against the failure of essential public services. On Sunday night, the local headquarters of both the KDP and PUK were set alight.

Governments have very selective vision

Add the continued fear of civil war, as the KDP facilitates Turkish attacks on mountain villages in areas that have long been controlled by the PKK, thus handing over control to a power that regards all Kurds as enemies, and it is

hard to see how anyone can think that this is a structure on which to base plans for the future. This hasn't stopped visiting delegations, such as the recent one from the UK, coming to strengthen ties with the KRG.



Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

Of course, when it comes to business, governments have very selective vision. It is almost as if it is considered unseemly to make any criticism except when your own self-interests are at stake. In a world where international leaders really cared about our collective future, the talk would not be of missile systems and competition for exploiting gas reserves (which should in any case be left in the ground), but would try, instead, to address the threat of Erdoğan's fascism. Every time the 'international community' fails to respond to attacks on freedom and on freedom of speech, or fails to follow through on those criticisms that are made, Turkey is emboldened to take their attacks further.

So, we see, as last week, even more opposition politicians and activists – especially Kurds – detained and arrested, and we learn of more deliberately callous treatment of political prisoners, including the large numbers under remand. While common criminals were released in response to the risks of coronavirus contagion in prison, political prisoners have been left to face spreading infection without even proper cleaning materials. Prisoners are continuing their rotating hunger strike to protest their conditions as well as the

continued isolation of Abdullah Ocalan, and their families are calling attention to the vindictive responses of the authorities, which include searches three times a day and the removal of all books and writing equipment.

But perhaps the most heart-breaking prison story in last week's news concerned the fate of upwards of 500 people from Rojava, who have been captured by the bandit gangs that operate with impunity in the Turkish-occupied areas, and then handed over to Turkey when their families failed to produce the ransom demanded. The deeply-politicised Turkish judicial system seems to have had no problem assigning them to spend the rest of their lives in Turkish prisons, while their families are left wondering what has happened to them.

If any international authorities do want to pursue the Turkish clampdown on freedom further, the International Institute of Journalists has just published a report from their October investigation into Turkey's treatment of journalists and the press. After describing arrests and censorship, the increasingly politicised judiciary and regulators, and growing state control of the media – including of social media – the authors highlight 'the stark contrast between the extensive work conducted by the EUD [the European Union Delegation in Turkey] in exposing the failure of Turkey to respect democratic principles and protect basic human rights and the position taken by the Council of the European Union towards Turkey' in the many concessions made to try and negotiate the future of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Turkey's imperialist adventures may not make it popular, but international politics is not interested in popularity, just strategic alliances – whether these take the form of Turkey's recent overtures towards previously denounced foes, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, or European readiness to overlook blatant breaches of claimed fundamental values.