

The tug-of-war over Kurdish nationalist leader Abdullah Ocalan

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The conflict over the extradition of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the nationalist Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK), has grown into a substantial diplomatic and political crisis between governments in Rome, Ankara, Bonn and Washington. While on the surface the issue is whether Ocalan should be put on trial, and if so, in which country, concealed within this question are substantial conflicts over the aims and interests of various great powers.

Ocalan arrived in Rome from Moscow on November 12 and was arrested at the airport by the Italian police. There he applied for political asylum. The Turkish government, which has pursued him on charges of high treason and terrorist activities, demanded his immediate extradition. They were supported in their demand by the US government, which put pressure on Rome to extradite the PKK leader to Ankara. However, it soon became clear that neither the Italian judiciary nor the government were prepared to accede to such a demand.

Italian law forbids extradition to a country that retains the death penalty. And the pledge by the Turkish justice minister to immediately do away with the death penalty did not change the minds of the Italian judges. After a few days a court quashed the Turkish arrest warrant and set Ocalan free, on condition that he not leave Rome.

There was widespread political opposition in Italy to the extradition of Ocalan to Turkey. The majority of Italian parties, both left and right, regard the Kurds as an oppressed people and Ocalan as a political leader, not as a terrorist.

In October the exile parliament of the Kurds, which is dominated by the PKK, convened in Italy with Italian parliamentary deputies as observers. At the end of the month the ERNK (National Liberation Front of Kurdistan), a political front organisation of the PKK, held a press conference in the Senate building and demanded autonomy discussions with the Turkish government.

Ankara has reacted to the refusal to deliver Ocalan by threatening Italy with an economic boycott and denouncing the Italian government in an hysterical fashion. A football match between a Turkish and Italian club was cancelled for 'security reasons'. In the main cities of Turkey pitched battles took place between Turks and Kurds. Only after the European Union declared its support for Italy, and threatened Turkey with retaliatory measures should it go ahead with an economic boycott, did the Turkish government tone down its campaign. It is no longer insisting on the extradition of the PKK leader and would be satisfied if a trial against him were carried out in Italy or Germany.

An arrest warrant against Ocalan has been in force in Germany for eight years. He is accused of the murder of a renegade member of the PKK who was assassinated in the German city of Rüsselsheim in 1984. Although the German National Attorney's Office has emphasised that they have enough evidence for a trial, the German government has refrained from applying for extradition. Officially the reasons given are 'grounds of opportuneness and internal security'. The government fears that a trial in Germany, home to 2 million Turks and half a million Kurds, would result in violent

clashes.

For its part, Rome has reacted angrily to the position of Bonn. 'We have arrested Ocalan on the basis of a German arrest warrant, not to keep him in Italy,' said Foreign Minister Dini. Further action is to be clarified following a meeting between German Chancellor Schröder and Italian Prime Minister D'Alema.

Behind the dispute over Ocalan is the question of how to resolve the 75-year-old Kurdish conflict. Since 1984 a bloody war has raged in the mainly Kurdish south-east of Turkey. The conflict has cost the lives of thousands of guerrillas and soldiers and extracted the heaviest toll on the civilian population. The toll from the fighting to date is over 30,000 dead, more than a million refugees and 3,000 devastated Kurdish villages.

In the past the Turkish offensive against the Kurds was more or less openly supported by both the German and American governments. Germany delivered weapons from the reserves of the East German National Peoples Army to its NATO partner Turkey. It has been an open secret that these arms were being used against the Kurds. In the North of Iraq, and under NATO air protection, the US allowed the Turkish army to proceed against the PKK.

In connection, however, with discussions over the entry of Turkey into the European Union, the chorus of voices in Europe demanding a resolution of the Kurdish question has grown. The war, which costs 10 million dollars a day, is so high a burden to the Turkish treasury that it virtually rules out Turkey's integration into the EU. According to estimates, 40 percent of the country's budget goes towards the military, and most of the remaining moneys are used to pay the interest on Turkey's national debt.

The terror against the civilian population and the indescribable poverty in the war regions have provoked a regular stream of refugees to Western Europe, which the European governments are seeking to stem as quickly as possible. Moreover the war and accompanying Turkish chauvinism strengthen the Islamic fundamentalists on the one hand and the Turkish military on the other. The political domination of the military is not easily compatible with membership in the EU.

Ocalan's flight to Rome has been regarded by many European commentators as a bid to intensify pressure on the Turkish government. The *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote: 'Whoever takes the issue of justice seriously must first and foremost drive towards a solution to the Kurdish conflict. The arrest of the PKK chief could be a lever to force both sides to rethink their positions.' And German Foreign Minister Fischer stated he can 'only appeal on Turkey to resolve with wisdom and generosity the Kurdish question, on the basis of definite conciliation to the minority.'

Despite an official ban on the PKK and its affiliated organisations, the German authorities have had close contact with Ocalan for some time. According to *Der Spiegel* magazine, the leader of the Kurds 'has been for some time a favourite partner in discussions and negotiations. Since 1995 envoys from the political world and from security agencies have made pilgrimages to Ocalan and agreed on a strategy for de-escalation.' On this

basis the PKK stopped their attacks against Turkish institutions in Germany, while a few leading PKK functionaries gave themselves up to the police.

The *Rundschau* sees a further reason why the German government does not want to extradite Ocalan: 'Politics is called for, not abdication to a national judiciary that can only deal with individual cases.' Should the PKK leader stand trial for murder in Germany, the latter could hardly intervene for a resolution of the Kurdish question, with the participation of the PKK.

Up to now the US has opposed such a solution and backed the Turkish government in its war of destruction against the PKK. Turkish troops push into the northern part of Iraq and destroy PKK bases on a regular basis. They are supported partly by two Kurdish organisations, the KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) of Masud Barzani and the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) led by Jalal Talabani, which carried out discussions with the Turkish government arranged by the US.

In September Ankara sought to finish off the PKK. It sent troops to the Syrian border and threatened Syria with war if the latter did not withdraw its support for the PKK. Since 1980 Ocalan had lived in Damascus and run training camps in Syria. For its part the Syrian government used the PKK to put pressure on Turkey over the water of the river Euphrates, which Turkey threatens to appropriate with the construction of the Ataturk dam.

Eventually Syria gave way and on the October 20 banned the PKK. Ocalan was forced to flee to Moscow where, despite the support of the Duma, he was denied political asylum, primarily as a result of American pressure. So he travelled to Rome.

The reason for the different approaches of the American government on the one side and the Italian and German governments on the other is not so much their positions on the so-called 'terrorism' of the PKK. The US, for example, played the leading role in the peace deals in Northern Ireland and Palestine, involving organisations that were formerly regarded as 'terrorist'. It has much more to do with strategic interests. Whoever has the upper hand in regulating the Kurdish question will be in a position to exert powerful influence in the region.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, strategic relations in the Middle East have changed dramatically. Following the gulf war, in which the US was able to temporarily secure its control in a war against Iraq, the Caspian Sea and the adjoining regions of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have become increasingly attractive prospects. The region is regarded as the most important oil reservoir for the twenty-first century.

This means that the territories of northern Iraq and southern Turkey, populated by Kurds, have assumed added significance. This is the route favoured by the US for a pipeline that will transport Caspian oil to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Alternative routes through Iran or Russia, leading to increased strategic leverage for these countries, are regarded as unacceptable by the US government.

The PKK is well aware of its market value in this conflict. A resolution passed at its fifth conference in March of this year reads: 'The national liberation struggle led by our party, the PKK, has acquired a significance which can no longer be ignored.... Kurdistan assumes a geo-politically strategic position in the triangle of the Middle East, the Balkan countries and the Caucasus, in that it possesses valuable mineral resources.' Then follows an appeal to establish and develop relations with other countries 'with the politically necessary maturity and seriousness'.

Following his expulsion from Damascus, Ocalan has set his sights fully on a solution with the support of the states of the European Union. In one of his first interviews following his arrival in Rome, he declared that the European states should intervene to ensure a political dialogue so as to resolve the conflict between Ankara and the PKK. In a seven-point statement presented to the press by his lawyer last Wednesday he renounced violence and declared his abandonment of the aim of an

independent Kurdish state. Instead the PKK will pursue its aims through purely 'political' means and will be satisfied with autonomy for the Kurds within the framework of the Turkish state.

The seven-point statement called for the ending of all military actions against Kurdish villages, the unrestricted return of all refugees, the dissolution of the village militias established against the PKK, autonomy status which does not interfere with the territory of Turkey, equal rights for the Kurds, recognition of language, culture and identity as well as pluralism and freedom of religion.

Ocalan's transformation into an advocate of a negotiated deal is no surprise. The strategy of the PKK since 1984 of establishing an independent Kurdish state through military means has for some time proven to be a dead-end. Since the beginning of the nineties Ocalan has repeatedly indicated he was prepared to accept an 'autonomous' Kurdistan within Turkish territory.

In January of this year he admitted that the war against the Turkish state had been lost. He praised the 'peace' agreements in Palestine and Northern Ireland, praised Palestinian leader Arafat and repeatedly offered his services to both the US and the European governments in working out a similar deal--at first without success.

With his flight to Rome he has established new conditions. The newspaper *Die Zeit* spoke of 'a move forwards, in order to compensate for the military defeat.'

There are considerable doubts, however, whether Ocalan can play the same role in relation to the Kurds that Arafat plays in relation to the Palestinians. Initially Arafat enjoyed huge popularity and was able to rely on a large reservoir of credibility, which has since begun to melt away as disappointment over the consequences of the peace process grows.

Ocalan was never as popular as Arafat. The strength of the PKK was that of a strict organisation based on the Stalinist model. Dissidents inside his own organisation and Kurds with divergent views were dealt with ruthlessly. But the strength of the PKK was also based on Ankara's policies. It was above all the brutality with which the Turkish government proceeded against all Kurds, including the politically moderate, that continually drove new forces into the arms of the PKK.

An autonomous Turkish Kurdistan under the domination of the PKK will be as little able to improve the situation of the broad masses as autonomy status for the Palestinians. It will merely establish privileges for some of the cadre of the PKK who undertake the task of suppressing the Kurdish masses. The only way out lies in the unification of Turkish and Kurdish workers on the basis of a socialist perspective, a solution strictly ruled out by the PKK.

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