US policy toward the Kurds--a mass of contradictions

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The US government played an important role in the kidnapping and arrest of Kurdish nationalist leader Abdullah Ocalan by the Turkish authorities. FBI agents reportedly tipped off the Turkish government about Ocalan's presence in Nairobi, Kenya. As Ocalan arrived in chains at his island prison near Istanbul, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart hailed his abduction as a triumph in the struggle against "international terrorism."

American governments always claim to be motivated in their foreign policy by timeless moral principles: the defense of democracy, the right of self-determination, resistance to aggression, etc. Nothing so demonstrates the hypocrisy of these claims as the use of the epithet "terrorist" for any group which is in conflict with the day-to-day demands of US imperialism. As used by Washington, the designation "terrorist" has no other content than being, in the eyes of American policymakers, an obstacle to the global appetites of US business interests.

Ocalan's political organization, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), is classified as a "terrorist organization" by the US State Department. But that list included, not so long ago, such groups as the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Irish Republican Army and the African National Congress, with which the US government now enjoys cordial relations.

Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein was barred from entry to the United States for many years. But when it suited American interests to put pressure on Britain for a Northern Ireland deal, the "terrorist" Mr. Adams became guest of honor at the Clinton White House.

Yassir Arafat was branded a terrorist for decades before his political transformation into "statesman" and Nobel Peace Prize co-winner, in return for his agreement to police the West Bank and Gaza Strip on behalf of American and Israeli interests.

Then there is Nelson Mandela, another former "terrorist" turned Nobel Peace Prize winner. Under one reactionary US law, passed in the 1980s, fundraising for Mandela's ANC was a criminal offense. Last month Bill Clinton, during an appearance in Detroit, declared that Mandela was the greatest man he had met in the course of his presidency.

What the US government labels "terrorism" is political opposition to any repressive government which happens to be allied with the United States.

The PKK is a mass political organization of the oppressed Kurdish people who make up the majority of the population in southeastern Turkey. There are 20 million Kurds in the Middle East, living in mountainous territory divided up by the states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Armenia.

The largest number of Kurds live within the borders of Turkey, where they are not only economically impoverished, but also are denied all political and cultural rights. The PKK acquired prominence during the 1980s, a period marked by ferocious repression by the Turkish military regime against the Kurdish population.

A noted scholar, David McDowall, has described the methods used by the Turkish military against Kurds:

"First, it tried to stifle Kurdish culture. In October 1983 it introduced Law 2932 prohibiting the use of Kurdish. Already the term 'Kurdish' was such a bogey that the law found a form of words to make its prohibition explicit without mentioning the offending word. Such a prohibition primarily affected the literate and activist classes. But the administration went further to remind the illiterates too that all trace of Kurdish identity was to be banned. In December 1982 the minister for education reminded all provincial governors that folk songs in East and south-East Anatolia might be used for ethnic or separatist purposes and must only be sung in Turkish.... Those who gave their children Kurdish names found that (under Law 1587) names which 'contradict the national culture, morality and traditions and insult the public cannot be illegally registered on birth certificates'. A number of cases arose in which children were renamed. It was easier to change place names. By 1986, 2,842 out of 3,524 villages in Adiyaman, Gaziantep, Urfa, Mardin, Siirt and Diyarbakir had been renamed to expunge Kurdish identity. No Kurd could be unaware of what was happening. Inevitably, however, the Army saw its prime role as ensuring physical control. During the 1980s the number of troops allocated to the control of Kurdistan steadily increased to reach 200,000 by the early 1990s.

"State oppression was most overwhelming and pervasive in the field of physical abuse and torture. Only pro-government villages were inexperienced in the routine of security sweeps in which hundreds were arbitrarily arrested and beaten to confess to assisting the PKK. Doubtless many had, either by conviction or intimidation, assisted the PKK with food, shelter or merely by looking the other way as they passed through. But the manner in which the security forces sought evidence from those it detained was calculated to be the most potent nutrient to the PKK's own recruitment activities.

"Few escaped the trauma or frequency of security operations. In some cases 'capture and kill' orders were issued. In the words of

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one asylum seeker, 'The children became so fearful that whenever a policeman came to the house they would immediately put their hands on their heads as a gesture of surrender.' Those detained were kept in inhumane conditions and frequently received bastinado (*falaka),* electric shocks or sexual abuse. In the words of one peasant, 'I was ready to confess that I had killed one hundred men, because they brought my wife and sister, stripped and threatened to rape them right there'" (*A History of the Modern Kurds*, New York: 1996, pp. 424-25).

Until 1991 it was illegal for a Kurdish mother to address her own children in the Kurdish language while walking down the street. It is still illegal to publish a book, broadcast a radio program or conduct any public business in Kurdish. There are no Kurdish schools or newspapers, and the only political party sympathetic to Kurdish aspirations, the People's Democracy Party, is about to be banned.

To defend the elementary democratic rights and aspirations of the Kurdish people, in the face of such systematic and brutal repression, means to defy Turkish law and the Turkish state, ultimately by force of arms. That is what the PKK has done, and for this resistance it has been branded "terrorist," first by Ankara and then by Washington.

Hypocrisy is piled on hypocrisy in the case of the Kurds. According to American propaganda, oppression of the Kurds is one of the principal crimes of Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi dictator gassed the Kurdish town of Halabja during the Iran-Iraq War. (He also gassed Iranian troops repeatedly during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, but that was done with the approval of the US government.)

The constitution of Iraq actually affords legal recognition to the Kurdish people, who are named as one of the component ethnic and language groups in the country, along with the majority Arabs. The country's vice-president is by law a Kurd, and the Kurdish people are guaranteed the right to instruction in their own language.

Granted, these rights are largely theoretical under Saddam Hussein's ruthless dictatorship, but the Turkish constitution affords the Kurds even less--denying their very existence as a people. No American government has suggested that Turkey be bombed or its government overthrown as punishment for brutality towards the Kurds, even though far more Kurdish people have been killed by Turkish forces than by Iraqi.

The contradictions in American policy are even starker when the US indifference toward the Kurds is contrasted with its posture of concern towards the Albanian majority population in Kosovo. In southeastern Turkey, the Kurdish majority of the population is deprived of democratic rights by a brutal military occupation. The Turkish government maintains that Kurdistan is an integral part of the Turkish state and denounces the Kurdish opposition as "terrorist."

In Kosovo, the Albanian majority of the population is likewise deprived of democratic rights by a brutal military occupation. The Serbian government maintains that Kosovo is an integral part of the Serbian state and denounces the Albanian opposition as "terrorist."

The US government denounces the Serbian dictatorship and announced plans to bomb Belgrade as early as Saturday, February 20, to enforce its demands for a NATO occupation of Kosovo. According to the Clinton administration, the destruction of Serbian lives is necessary to prevent a "humanitarian tragedy" in Serbian occupied Kosovo.

No such measures, of course, are proposed to prevent the ongoing humanitarian tragedy in the Kurdish populated regions of Turkey. On the contrary, following the US-aided seizure of Ocalan, Turkish troops have launched a new offensive against PKK guerrillas both within Turkey and across the border in northern Iraq.

The contradictions and outright lies that abound in the US policy towards the PKK are revealed once the mantras uttered by government spokesmen are subjected to even a cursory objective analysis. This is why the role of the mass media, nowhere more corrupt and venal than in the US, is so important. The government proceeds with the assurance that none of its claims will be subjected to critical review by the TV networks or mass dailies. There will be no examination of the historical and political background to the seizure of Ocalan or the struggle of the Kurds. On the contrary, the government is assured a free hand in its efforts to misinform and manipulate public opinion.

Behind the public posturing about "anti-terrorism," there are cold calculations about the strategic and economic interests of American imperialism. This has long been the case, and especially in the Middle East.

In 1980 Iraq was on a US State Department list of nations charged with sponsoring terrorism. Then Saddam Hussein ordered his army to invade Iran, in the midst of the standoff with Washington over the seizure of the US embassy in Tehran. The State Department list subsequently changed--Iraq was removed, while Iran, the American enemy, was added. Significantly, last week, Iran was finally removed from this list of "rogue states," as the Clinton administration sought to enlist its support against Iraq.

The real material interests of American imperialism in the suppression of the Kurds are not hard to detect. There is the fundamental strategic concern for the maintenance of the Turkish state, along with Israel and Saudi Arabia one of the most important US allies in the region.

An additional and increasingly important factor is the role of oil. Washington has opposed efforts to build a pipeline from the oil-rich Caspian Sea through either Russia or Iran. It favors, for strategic reasons, a more costly and roundabout route, through Georgia and Turkey to the port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean. This route would bring the pipeline straight through Kurdish-populated southeastern Turkey.

When Washington weighs the profits from billions of barrels of oil against the democratic rights of 10 million Kurds, there is no contest.

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