

The manhunt for Ocalan: How Washington flouts international law and democratic rights

Barry Grey**24 February 1999**

High-level US government officials have outlined Washington's role in the kidnapping of Kurdish guerrilla leader Abdullah Ocalan, making it clear that the US organized a global manhunt in violation of international law and basic democratic procedures.

After initially denying any "direct" involvement in the February 15 abduction of Ocalan, US officials over the weekend acknowledged that Washington played the central role in hunting Ocalan down and delivering him into the hands of his Turkish enemies.

Last Friday the *Los Angeles Times* quoted Turkish officials who said American FBI agents detected Ocalan's presence at the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya within two days of his clandestine arrival on February 2. The FBI informed Turkey of the political refugee's whereabouts, setting in motion the chain of events that ended with Ocalan's seizure by Turkish security forces and his transfer, blindfolded and in chains, to an island prison near Istanbul.

After the appearance of the *Los Angeles Times* article, "senior" US officials, whose names were not divulged, outlined for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* the American role in Ocalan's expulsion from Syria last October, and the subsequent refusal of European governments to grant him political asylum. These reports make it clear that the kidnapping of Ocalan, who heads the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK), was an American operation.

For some 15 years Ocalan was based in Syria. Last October the Turkish government, which has extremely close military and intelligence ties to Washington, demanded that Damascus expel the Kurdish leader and massed troops along its border with Syria. At the same time the US issued a private demand to Syrian leader Hafez El Assad, who quickly knuckled under to the US and Turkey and threw out his former ally.

For the next four months Ocalan fled from one European country to another, landing at various points in Russia, Italy and Greece, and seeking in vain a country that would recognize his right, as a political refugee, to asylum. Throughout this period the US State Department bore down on European governments, demanding that they close their borders to the PKK leader. At the same time the CIA and other US intelligence agencies monitored Ocalan's movements and kept Ankara informed.

Soon after Ocalan landed in the Greek embassy in Nairobi he was spotted by US intelligence officials. Nairobi is a den of American intelligence and police operatives. Since last August's bombing of the US embassy, more than 100 FBI and CIA agents have been deployed to the Kenyan capital. The US agents placed the Greek embassy under surveillance and monitored Ocalan's cell phone conversations with political contacts.

Speaking of the American role in Ocalan's seizure, a senior Clinton administration official told the *New York Times*, "We spent a good deal of time working with Italy and Germany and Turkey to find a creative way to bring him to justice." The use of the word "justice" in relation to the kidnapping of Ocalan is farcical. Aside from the violation of the democratic right of political asylum, the purpose of the operation was to hand the Kurdish leader over to a regime that has been waging a civil war against the Kurdish population and systematically repressing its political opponents.

Ocalan is being held incommunicado on the prison island of Imrali. The Turkish government has barred his lawyers from entering the country or speaking with their client. Ankara has announced that the PKK leader will be tried before a special state security court, without the benefit of international observers.

On Tuesday Ocalan was charged with treason in a hearing held at the Imrali prison. The proceedings, closed to the public and the media, were presided over by a security court judge. Turkish press reports said the prosecutor asked for the death penalty.

Far from pursuing justice, the US has conspired to send Ocalan to the executioner's block. A whole series of questions are raised by the actions of the American government. On what legal basis was Ocalan seized and forcibly transferred to Turkey? Was an extradition order issued? Under what provisions of international law did the United States assume the authority to block the right of a political refugee to asylum? Is Ocalan wanted for crimes committed against American citizens? Has the US issued any such indictment? By what authority did the United States spy on the Greek embassy and conspire with Turkey and other countries to abduct Ocalan?

The fact that none of these questions have even been raised is a testament to the servility of the American media, which function as little more than press agencies of the Pentagon, the CIA and the State Department. It further testifies to the appalling level of ignorance and indifference to democratic rights that characterize liberal public opinion in America.

With the rarest of exceptions, as far as these circles are concerned the American government's labeling of Ocalan and the PKK as "terrorist" justifies any and all actions taken to exterminate the PKK leader and the movement he heads. This designation, however, cannot be squared with the international eruption of Kurdish fury and despair in reaction to Ocalan's arrest.

Ocalan is not a terrorist, but rather the leader of a bourgeois nationalist movement which draws its support from wide layers of Kurds, a people brutally oppressed for decades by the Turkish authorities. Washington's designation of the PKK as a terrorist organization is based entirely on the economic, political and military interests of American imperialism.

The US organized an international campaign to "get" Ocalan because his party cuts across Washington's strategic alliance with Turkey. In recent years Turkey's value as an American ally has risen, largely because of its role in the US war against Iraq, and its geo-political significance in the international scramble for control over the vast oil reserves in the Caspian Sea region.

The Turkish air base at Incirlik houses the US planes

that carry out almost daily strikes against targets in the northern "no fly" zone of Iraq. Incirlik also serves as a post for American electronic spying on Baghdad.

The Clinton administration has, moreover, made an enormous commitment to building an oil pipeline from Baku in Azerbaijan through southeastern Turkey to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Such a pipeline would pass directly through the region of Turkey dominated by the Kurds.

In the weeks leading up to the seizure of Ocalan, the newly installed prime minister of Turkey, Bulent Ecevit, made public criticisms of US air strikes against Iraq and suggested he was reconsidering the Americans' use of Incirlik as their base of operations. Ecevit provoked public criticism from the US when he invited Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to meet with him in Ankara. That meeting occurred on the eve of Ocalan's capture in Kenya, and was followed by a blunt statement from Ecevit reaffirming Turkish support for the US air strikes.

It is clear that the US manhunt of Ocalan was a criminal operation carried out by Washington as a *quid pro quo* with the Turkish regime. It is an example of imperialist "realpolitik" in its most cynical and reactionary form. It demonstrates the degree of lawlessness and contempt for democratic procedures that prevail within the American political and corporate establishment.

Workers all over the world, and especially in the US, must take a warning. The foreign policy of the American ruling class is an extension of its domestic policy. One cannot be walled off from the other. In their flouting of democratic rights internationally, the ruling powers in the US expose their general political outlook and the methods they are prepared to use to secure their class interests, not only abroad, but also at home.



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