

The seizure of Abdullah Ocalan: whatever happened to the right of asylum?

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Türkçe metin / Also in Turkish

The abduction of Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Workers Party of Kurdistan (PKK), is an attack on the Kurdish masses that must be emphatically denounced and condemned by working people and all those who are concerned with the defense of democratic rights.

The hounding of Ocalan by virtually every government of Europe, at the behest of the United States and its reactionary client regime in Ankara, is not only hypocritical, but contemptible. No one who reads of the circumstances surrounding Ocalan's seizure in Kenya can help but be incensed at the cynicism and perfidy of all the governments that served as accomplices to the Turkish hangmen of the Kurds.

Ocalan is not a terrorist. He is the leader of a mass movement that is fighting one of the most repressive regimes in the world. Turkey has long been synonymous with the suppression of democratic rights. It has for decades carried out a murderous assault on the Kurdish people who live within its borders, and repeatedly extended its war to the Kurdish population in northern Iraq. Ocalan is the leader of a bourgeois nationalist movement that is involved in a civil war.

The attempt to portray the Turkish regime as the democratic victim of a demonic terrorist is ludicrous. Even the politically vetted Western press has carried reports of repeated overtures by Ocalan for negotiations with the Turkish government, all of which were swept aside. The present regime of Bulent Ecevit is the product of systematic political repression. Last year Ankara banned the country's largest party, the Islamic-based Welfare Party, and just three weeks ago, in advance of April elections, the chief prosecutor demanded the closure of the pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party. It is a criminal offense merely to advocate negotiations with the PKK.

The International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, has a long and public record of opposition to the politics of the PKK. Our movement rejects the PKK's nationalist perspective and the false tactics that flow from it. That in no way, however, implies the slightest support for the oppressors of the Kurdish people, or diminishes our defense of the democratic rights of their mass organizations and political leaders.

The persecution and abduction of Ocalan marks a repudiation

by governments around the world, first and foremost the United States, of the fundamental democratic right of political asylum. One regime after another--from the supposedly "radical" nationalist government of Hafez El Assad in Syria to the "democratic" governments of Europe--closed its borders to a political leader who faces torture and death at the hands of the military-backed regime in Turkey.

What was once a scrupulously observed and venerated right--the right of asylum--effectively no longer exists. Under the hypocritical banner of "anti-terrorism," all forms of oppositional activity against political and economic oppression are being criminalized.

In the 18th and 19th centuries it was recognized that masses of people were engaged in political struggles against oppressive regimes. A vital and proper distinction was made between such political struggle and criminal activity. It was accordingly accepted that leaders of mass movements had a right to seek safe haven from their persecutors.

During the American Revolution, it was possible for Franklin and Jefferson to live in France without fear of being extradited to England. In the 19th century, revolutionary leaders such as Garibaldi and Marx were able to move throughout Europe and live as political exiles. But in the 20th century, this basic right has been increasingly undermined.

The eruption of outrage and despair by Kurds throughout Europe shows that Ocalan leads a mass movement, giving the lie to the self-serving and simplistic rationale offered by the US for his seizure. "We are obviously very pleased with the apprehension of this terrorist leader," said White House Press Secretary Joe Lockhart.

The role of the United States in the kidnapping of Ocalan must be investigated and exposed. Already press reports cite Turkish officials who assert that American FBI agents, in Nairobi since last August's bombing of the US embassy there, tipped off the Turkish government about Ocalan's presence.

However two points can immediately be made about the role of the US government. Its support for the seizure of Ocalan follows its long-standing modus operandi of applying the label "terrorist" to individuals, political movements and even entire countries that, for one reason or another, become an obstacle to the geo-political and economic designs of the American

bourgeoisie. The aim is to discredit in the public eye all such impediments to the global appetites of US imperialism and create the conditions for their annihilation. Not infrequently, today's "terrorist"--such as Saddam Hussein--is yesterday's ally and friend of the "free world".

The fact that a leader like Ocalan, supposedly nothing more than a bomb-throwing killer, is able to win a following among wide layers of oppressed people is never probed, or even discussed. Nothing is said about the terrible conditions under which the Kurds are forced to live, let alone who is responsible for these conditions. No distinction is drawn between a movement which draws its support from the oppressed, and the economic and political elites that enforce their oppression.

As always, behind the official crusade against terrorism stand less chaste motives, such as the scramble of the US and the other great powers over control of oil, both in the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea region. There is a direct, if not openly discussed, connection between the relentless manhunt for Ocalan and the plans of the US and Turkey to build a pipeline from the oil-rich Caspian to the Mediterranean that must traverse the Kurdish-populated southeast of Turkey.

The second and more basic point is that the United States government is the last in the world to lecture anyone on the evils of terrorism. The US has a long and bloody record of funding, training and supervising professional killers who terrorize populations all over the world. Washington is responsible for mass murder carried out by mercenary armies and death squads in every country of Central America. US Presidents have shaken hands with the leaders of death squads from countries such as El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. The US role in the contra war against the Nicaraguan people is well known.

CIA stooges in the leadership of the infamous Renamo force slaughtered civilians in Mozambique for years. Unita head Jonas Savimbi, another CIA asset, stalked Angola for decades, spreading death and destruction. These are but a few of scores of examples that could be cited of US-sponsored terrorism.

In the hunting down and capture of Ocalan, of particular significance--and reprehensibility--is the political coloration of all the other governments that played a central role. They comprise a rogue's gallery of social democratic and "left" governments that might aptly be termed a united front of oppression.

Assad of Syria, the former leader of the Rejectionist Front, knuckled under to US and Turkish pressure and expelled Ocalan last October. The PKK leader had lived in Damascus since 1980.

Ocalan fled to Russia, supposedly a democracy in the making, which denied him political asylum. In November he took refuge in Rome, where he once again applied for asylum. The Italian government, headed by Massimo D'Alema, formerly a leader of the Italian Communist Party, rejected Turkish demands for his extradition, but refused to grant

asylum. D'Alema worked behind the scenes for Ocalan's expulsion, and by mid-January he was forced out.

For several weeks Ocalan's whereabouts were the subject of intense speculation, as government after government refused to give him shelter. Germany, with a Social Democratic Chancellor and a leader of the Green Party as foreign minister, and the largest Kurdish minority of any country on the European continent, would not let Ocalan in.

The PKK leader was denied admission to the Netherlands and Greece, while Italy and Denmark warned him they did not want him on their territory. On February 1, Ocalan's plane was allowed to touch down on the Greek island of Corfu, after arriving from "neutral and democratic" Switzerland.

The following day Ocalan tried to set down in Rotterdam, Holland, in order to appear before the International Court of Arbitration to plead the Kurdish cause. But he was prevented from doing so by the Dutch government, which declared him an "undesirable alien".

As Ocalan's plane was reportedly heading for Greece, a spokesman for the "socialist" PASOK government in Athens said, "Our policy is crystal clear. We do not desire Ocalan's presence in Greece."

Instead the Greek government encouraged Ocalan to fly to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, where he was hidden on Greek embassy premises. It is no secret that since the bombing of the US embassy, Nairobi has been awash with agents of the American CIA and FBI, and the Israeli Mossad.

It was only a matter of time before various intelligence agencies coordinated with Kenyan and Greek officials and Turkish commandos to drag the Kurdish leader from the embassy and spirit him onto a plane to Turkey. The Turkish leader who presided over the abduction, Bulent Ecevit, is a veteran social democratic politician.

This ignoble chain of events provides a picture of the complete integration of the various bourgeois nationalist regimes, ex-Stalinist and social democratic parties and leaders into the political and intelligence apparatus of US and world imperialism. The flagrant violation of a basic democratic right, the right to political asylum, must be taken as warning by the international working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* emphatically denounces Ocalan's seizure and demands his immediate release. We urge all those concerned with the defense of democratic rights to join in this demand.



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