

The Ocalan verdict: US realpolitik in league with the Turkish hangman

The Editorial Board
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The death sentence handed down Tuesday by a Turkish court against Abdullah Ocalan, the chairman of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), is an attack on the Kurdish people that must be emphatically condemned and opposed by working people and all those who seek to defend democratic rights.

The verdict of the state security court, which found Ocalan guilty of treason, separatism and murder and ordered that he be hanged, was a foregone conclusion. It was the final act in a legal travesty that began with the abduction of Ocalan, in flagrant violation of international law and the democratic right to political asylum, from the Greek embassy in Nairobi, Kenya on February 15.

The United States and the governments of Europe are all complicit in delivering Ocalan into the hands of the Turkish state, which has for the past fifteen years carried out a murderous civil war against the Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey and the Kurdish regions in the north of Iraq. Washington played the key role, organizing an international manhunt. It secretly applied pressure on Syria to expel Ocalan last October, and called on the governments of Europe to refuse the political refugee's appeals for asylum as he moved from country to country in the ensuing months. Nor did it require a great deal of arm-twisting to get the supposedly "radical" nationalist regime of Hafez El Assad and the social democratic governments of Europe to slam the door on Ocalan.

After Greece refused Ocalan entry and brought him instead to its embassy in Kenya, American FBI agents tipped off the Turkish secret police. They spirited the PKK leader into a plane, drugged him and flew him, chained and gagged, to the prison island of Imrali, 35 miles south of Istanbul, where he has remained in solitary confinement.

For nine days Ocalan was held incommunicado. Thereafter he was denied all but sporadic contact with his lawyers, and was not even permitted to read his indictment or other court documents. The Turkish authorities subjected Ocalan's lawyers to continuous threats and harassment. Several were arrested and beaten in the period leading up to the trial. Just last week one of the defense attorneys and his secretary were acquitted of charges of aiding the PKK. They had been arrested when they attempted to take documents from the trial, including a copy of the indictment, out of Turkey.

The trial itself, which began on May 31, was a show trial designed to impress on Kurds and political dissidents the power and ruthlessness of the Turkish state. Ocalan sat throughout the proceedings in a glass cage, from which he could not speak to his lawyers. The three-judge panel refused to hear witnesses proposed by the defense. Most of Ocalan's legal team resigned in protest before the trial ended.

The proceedings took place under conditions of mass arrests of Kurds and a relentless campaign of government propaganda against Ocalan and the PKK. Turkey maintains that the PKK is nothing more than a terrorist organization. It lays the responsibility for the 37,000 deaths which it acknowledges in the conflict in Kurdish Turkey, the vast majority of whom were Kurds, entirely at the feet of the separatist guerrillas.

The aim of such obviously false claims is to divert attention from the systematic repression of the Kurdish population, which is denied basic democratic rights, including the right to claim a distinct ethnic identity. Even US State Department documents acknowledge that the Turkish government has conducted a violent military campaign that has killed tens of thousands of Kurds and displaced hundreds of thousands more.

Ocalan is not a terrorist. He is the leader of a bourgeois nationalist movement with mass support that has been involved in a civil war. Over the past nine years he has declared several cease-fires and repeatedly called for negotiations with the regime in Ankara, which has rejected all such initiatives.

At the same time the nationalist perspective and guerrilla-war tactics of the PKK have brought the Kurdish resistance to a political dead-end. This was graphically demonstrated in the course of the trial, where Ocalan prostrated himself before the court and offered his collaboration with the Turkish state in return for a verdict sparing his life.

The PKK leader went so far as to denounce some of his lawyers, attack countries such as Iran, Syria and Greece which in the past provided support for the Kurdish guerrillas, and place the blame for PKK violence on his deputy, Semdin Sakik, recently condemned to death by a Turkish court.

Ocalan's servility did not forestall the death sentence, and it is unlikely it will prevent his eventual execution. The state security court's verdict automatically goes before an appeals court. If upheld, it will go to the Turkish parliament and then to President Suleyman Demirel for approval. Ocalan's final recourse will be an appeal before the European Court of Human Rights, although the Turkish foreign ministry issued a statement after the verdict that Turkey would not accept "advice or interference from other countries."

Having played a key role in Ocalan's abduction, some European governments hypocritically urged Ankara not to go ahead with his hanging. Germany in particular is concerned over the domestic consequences should the PKK leader be executed. It has the largest Turkish immigrant population in Europe, some 2 million, a quarter of whom are Kurds.

The United States was conspicuously not among those nations calling for clemency. Washington issued a terse statement that it had always considered the PKK to be a terrorist organization.

Washington's support for the state murder of Ocalan is consistent with the United States' distinction of being the most bloodthirsty practitioner of capital punishment of all the industrialized countries of the world. It is moreover consistent with the key role it has played in the sordid chain of events that culminated in Tuesday's verdict.

It is to be expected that no section of the US media will seek to expose the cynicism that underlies the American government's persecution of Ocalan. But the contradictions that abound in Washington's designation of "terrorist" organizations are nevertheless glaring, especially since it is supporting the execution of the PKK leader at the same time it is working with the leaders of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to prosecute its anti-Serb policy.

Washington's designation of an organization as "terrorist" or a country as "outlaw" is based entirely on the economic, political and military interests of American imperialism. Yesterday's terrorist can become today's freedom fighter when it suits the purposes—never openly acknowledged or explained to the American public—of US policy-makers. It is instructive in this regard to recall that 18 months ago the KLA was on the State Department's list of terrorist organizations.

In reality the PKK has far more the character of a genuine mass movement than the KLA. But while the KLA was at a certain point deemed a useful asset in the pursuit of US great power interests in the Balkans, the PKK cut across Washington's strategic alliance with Turkey. The value of this alliance has risen in recent years because of Turkey's role as a staging ground for US attacks on Iraq and its pivotal position in the struggle for control over the vast oil reserves in the Caspian Sea region. Washington's attitude toward Ocalan is shaped in no small measure by the fact that its preferred oil pipeline route from the Caspian to the Mediterranean runs through the Kurdish region of southeast Turkey.

The abduction and prosecution of Ocalan exemplify imperialist "realpolitik" in its most cynical form. The verdict of the Turkish court is a barbaric act that underscores the contempt for democratic procedures that prevails not only in Ankara, but within the ruling circles of the United States.



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