

Background to the Ocalan verdict: European interests and the Kurdish question

Justus Leicht
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The death sentence for Kurdish Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan announced June 29 by a Turkish state security court has evoked varying international reactions. Spokesmen for the Clinton administration called Ocalan a “terrorist” and said the US government would wait and see how the legal process unravelled.

The reaction by the member states of the European Union (EU) was markedly different. The European Commission and the European Council criticised the death sentence. The German council presidency warned Turkey that if the sentence were carried out the country's admission to the EU would be in danger.

The death sentence must be confirmed by the Turkish constitutional court, the parliament and the president before it can be carried out. Should this happen, Turkey could be excluded from the European Council. Germany has already delayed the planned delivery of war ships to Turkey.

Notwithstanding such protests, the EU has declared that it naturally condemns “all forms of terrorism” and is very interested in establishing good relations with Turkey. Not one of the European countries, for the most part headed by social democratic governments, granted Ocalan political asylum when he was being hunted by the Turkish secret police, in alliance with Washington, for four months last fall and winter. They are all complicit, in varying degrees, in Ocalan's abduction from Kenya by Turkish authorities last February.

In the aftermath of the trial and verdict, most of the European countries are appealing to Turkey, in a tone of friendly advice, to exercise forbearance and take up Ocalan's offer of collaboration in resolving the conflict with the Kurds. Russia has made similar statements.

The Turkish foreign ministry has roundly rejected any “advice or intervention by other countries”. Deputies of the conservative and fascist parties in the Turkish parliament jubilantly welcomed the verdict. Up to now Turkey's powerful military apparatus has made no comment. It has stated nevertheless that the PKK is a criminal terrorist organisation with whom one cannot make deals, and has carried on with its offensive against the guerrillas.

A few days before the sentencing a member of the army leadership, General Feridun Ozturk, said Ocalan was “begging for his life in vain.” The pensioned general Kenan Evren, leader of the military junta in Turkey following the army putsch of 1980 and state president until 1989, also spoke in favour of “Apo's” execution.

For some time the European Community has been attempting to establish closer ties with Turkey and has used the Kurdish question to put pressure on the government in Ankara toward this end. The German government of Chancellor Schröder has played a leading role and used its presidency of the European Council last year to build up

European influence on Turkey.

On the day of the verdict the conservative daily journal *Die Welt* explained the development as follows: “Already, shortly before taking office in November, the Red-Green government had introduced a cautious alteration to German policy with regard to Turkey. German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer had described Turkey as a ‘candidate’ for membership of the EU in his first appearance in the circle of EU foreign ministers. He was at pains to improve German-Turkish relations. The foreign office officially spoke of Turkey as a ‘membership candidate’. It must however fulfil the Copenhagen criteria for EU membership before it can be accepted into the circle of candidates. Representatives of the German government continually emphasise, including at the latest meeting in Warsaw at the weekend, that the West has a great strategic interest in firmly anchoring Turkey in the camp of the western democracies. This position was already advanced by the former foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel”.

In an exchange of letters that took place shortly before the recent Cologne summit, the Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit—like Germany's Gerhard Schröder, a social democrat—assured the German Chancellor that Turkey was working hard to fulfil the EU criteria. Schröder's response was a significant step forward, according to the *Turkish Daily News*. Without a trace of embarrassment Schröder spoke of “great progress in the field of human rights” in Turkey. The *Turkish Daily News* wrote:

“Schröder, in his letter, acknowledged the importance of ‘the search for a constructive initiative to resolve the problems of Southeast Turkey.’...Schröder noted Turkey's ‘readiness to accept its obligations arising from Article 6 of the Amsterdam Treaty and the Copenhagen criteria.’ He added that ‘a road map, which should be drawn up by the EU and Turkey working together in a spirit of trust,’ was needed to fulfil those goals.”

On June 7 the paper commented: “The new German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder kept his word, and Bonn did some fine-tuning on its policies towards Turkey. Bonn has changed its usual approach and has accepted that Turkey should be included among the other 11 EU candidate countries. This was not all. Germany actually bargained with its partners on behalf of Turkey. You will see that the chill in Bonn-Ankara relations will progressively decrease from now on”.

At the upcoming EU summit in Helsinki the German government plans once again to press for Turkey to be officially declared a membership candidate. The issue for Germany has nothing to do with human rights. Its “strategic interests” consist in Turkey's role as a bridge to the raw materials, markets and cheap labour of the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Germany, as Turkey's biggest single trading partner, has special

interests. In a dossier published by the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine* newspaper, Marc Landau, business manager of the German-Turkish Chamber for Industry and Trade, wrote under the heading “Bridging Function”:

“Since the last reports, 798 firms involving German capital have been registered in Turkey. If one includes firms with capital participation from Germany as well as other countries, this figure rises to 872.

“From the standpoint of the number of foreign businesses operating in Turkey, Germany stands far and away in first place, followed at a distance by the USA, which could claim 291 firms at the beginning of 1999. A majority of German firms in Turkey do not produce just for the large local market, but are strongly export-oriented. They aim at markets not only in the close-by countries of the Middle east, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, but also the Turkish-speaking republics of Central Asia. For their part, the Turkish subsidiaries of German companies have already founded their own subsidiaries.” (*Economic Partner—Turkey*, dossier of the FAZ, May 4, 1999).

Here it becomes clear why Germany is so concerned to integrate Turkey into the EU. However, as other press reports make clear, the project is not without its problems: “In Brussels there are fears about the powerful political influence of Turkey. With full membership Ankara will possess ten votes in the EU Council and 91 seats in the European Parliament.” (*Die Welt*)

Growing political influence of Turkey within the EU is also looked upon with mixed feelings because the government in Ankara is deeply anchored in the sphere of US foreign policy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War, Turkey has served as the US's most important force for exercising military control over the surrounding regions.

Already in 1993 the American Secretary of State at the time, Warren Christopher, stated: “We see Turkey as a strong regional power which can be a positive force in the settlement of regional disputes, a positive force for the expansion of free markets and trade and for secular democratic government.” (Quoted from: Askim Bozkurt, *Außenpolitische Dimensionen des Kurdenproblems in der Türkei*, Hamburg 1997).

“Democratic” in this context should not be taken literally. As long as the Turkish military serves American aims, it is free to trample on democratic rights and principles. This was made unmistakably clear by the American ambassador Marc Grossman, who said, “The Turkish and American leaderships...can overcome their different positions with regard to human rights questions when they appreciate their strategic significance for one and other.”

Under the banner of the “struggle against Kurdish terrorism”, Turkey, which has provided an important base for the American bombing of Iraq, has transformed the north of Iraq into a sort of “buffer zone”, where it continues to carry out military operations. These serve as an enormous source of Turkish pressure on Iraq's neighbour Syria. Another neighbour, Iran, accuses Turkey of suppressing not just the PKK, but also Islamic fundamentalist movements.

In addition, Turkey supports the Turkish-speaking republic of Azerbaijan. The latter country has been in a state of continual conflict with its neighbour Armenia (supported by Russia) in the region of Nagorno-Karabach, and possesses substantial reserves of oil. The US is seeking at all costs to prevent this oil from being transported over Russia or Iran and has therefore spoken out loudly in favour of a pipeline to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan through Georgia

and the Kurdish-occupied territories of Southeast Turkey.

In the Balkans Turkey has been the only country to side with the uncompromising US-British stance against the Serbs, thereby opposing the dominant line of European policy, which fears a breach in relations with Russia. The same applies to Iran and some of the Arab countries which the US is keen to keep in check. The EU therefore prefers to resolve the Kurdish question through compromises with Kurdish nationalists, instead of the ongoing militarisation of Turkey for the avowed purpose of conducting “the struggle against terrorism”.

There are other motives behind the voices warning against an over hasty acceptance of Turkey into the EU. *Die Welt* recently wrote: “The strategists of the EU warn of a cost explosion. In the countryside of Anatolia, Turkey resembles a developing land and would therefore qualify as a recipient of EU money par excellence.” Modernisation of Turkish agriculture has been prevented by the civil war in large parts of the southeast of Anatolia, and therefore would require huge economic support for its development.

German and European policy is aimed at offering Turkey membership in the EU and using the offer as a form of pressure and incentive. The Kurdish conflict is to be eased with a few minimal concessions with regard to cultural and political rights. Moderate Islamic and Kurdish nationalist forces are to be incorporated into the political system and the influence of right-wing Mafia forces on the Turkish state is to be limited. On this basis agriculture is to be modernised, the economy further deregulated and opened to international capital, and the system of social insurance to be “reformed”.

This policy, which is often described as “democratisation”, has had the opposite effect . Already the various market economy reforms demanded by the EU and the IMF have driven the vast majority of the Turkish population into misery, poverty and unemployment, while a tiny majority have been able to accumulate unbelievable wealth. More of such prescribed medicine will intensify class divisions and social instability.

Under these conditions a part of the Turkish bourgeoisie increasingly favours an authoritarian state and an increase in the power of the military. Thus the influence grows of those forces who want to see Ocalan hang, in order to demonstrate how they will proceed against any opposition.



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