

Bush gives green light for Turkey to attack PKK in Iraq

Historical, political issues in the Turkish-Kurd conflict

By the editorial board
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US President George W. Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan agreed on November 5 in Washington to commit a further crime in sorely afflicted Iraq. With logistic support from the US, the Turkish army will move against members of the PKK (Kurdish Worker's Party), which is hiding out in the Qadil mountains of northern Iraq.

Bush promised Erdogan that Turkey would be furnished with US intelligence on the camps and movements of the PKK. The Turkish press reported this as a "green light for military strikes," and following his meeting with Bush, Erdogan announced that operations would be launched against PKK positions in Iraq.

The meeting of Erdogan and Bush was preceded by weeks of propaganda and diplomatic tug-of-war. The Turkish generals have been pushing for months for an invasion into northern Iraq. They have used the question of the PKK to mobilise right-wing nationalist forces against the government of the AKP (Justice and Development Party).

After more than a dozen Turkish soldiers were killed in skirmishes with PKK fighters, the Turkish government finally gave way to the pressure of the military brass. On October 17, by a large majority, the AKP-dominated parliament gave the go-ahead for a cross-border operation into Iraq. The Turkish military has amassed 100,000 soldiers on the border and has begun attacking targets in northern Iraq, using combat aircraft and artillery.

The Turkish media has been running a hysterical nationalist campaign, directed not only against the PKK, but also against the Kurds in northern Iraq. On October 22, the mass-circulation daily *Hürriyet* threatened the leader of the northern Iraqi regional government, Masud Barzani, with "transform[ing] the 'Kurdish dream' into a 'Turkish nightmare,' " which "would result in a northern Iraq that went backwards 20 years in time."

Prime Minister Erdogan announced that a massive Turkish invasion would follow if the Iraqi government and the US occupying forces did not take immediate action against the PKK, closing its camps and handing over its leaders to Turkey.

The Iraqi government rejected this at first. Two weeks ago, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, himself a Kurd, said that Iraq could not solve Turkey's problems. "The handing over of PKK leaders to Turkey is a dream that will never be realised," he said. The militias of the northern Iraqi regional government threatened to stand in the way of any invading Turkish troops.

The US administration sought to avoid a confrontation between its most important allies within Iraq, the Iraqi Kurds, and its most important NATO partner in the region, Turkey. It pressed Ankara not to invade, fearing that such military action could destabilise northern Iraq, the only region in the occupied country that has some semblance of calm.

A large proportion of US military supplies enter Iraq via Turkey. Open conflict between the US and Turkey would also pose an obstacle to a war against Iran, which Washington increasingly appears to favour.

However, the Turkish government has been unable to get the genie it unleashed back into the bottle. The parliamentary vote for an invasion of Iraq has made it a hostage to the ultra-nationalists, who are insisting on a settling of accounts with the PKK in increasingly anti-American tones. Of all of the countries in the world, Turkey is now regarded as having the lowest opinion of the US. According to a study by an American institute, only 9 percent of Turks see the US in a positive light.

Last weekend, the US finally gave way to Turkish pressure. The action to be taken against the PKK was the central topic of a high-level conference in Ankara of Iraq's neighbouring countries. Participating alongside US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon were the foreign ministers of the countries wielding veto power on the UN Security Council and those of the G-8 states, including Germany's foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

Rice assured the Turkish government that the US regarded the PKK as a terrorist organisation and a common enemy, and promised support in the fight against the Kurdish organisation.

The conference adopted a resolution condemning all acts of terrorism committed in Iraq or from Iraqi soil against neighbouring countries. The resolution is being interpreted as providing thinly veiled authorisation for a Turkish military strike against the PKK.

For the US, the main issue now is that "Turkish military action is limited and strictly controlled," commented *Spiegel on-line*. "Where possible," the publication added, "military action should be coordinated with the Kurdish regional government so as to avoid clashes between the Turkish army and the northern Iraqi Kurdish militias."

The US has also been applying pressure on the PKK and the northern Iraqi regional government to ease the situation. In front of television cameras, the northern Iraqi police closed down the offices of the PKK in two cities.

The PKK has released eight Turkish soldiers it had taken prisoner some weeks ago. They were accompanied to Turkey personally by General David Petraeus, the commander of US forces in Iraq.

The meeting between Erdogan and Bush served to confirm the agreements made in Ankara.

The accord against the PKK that was agreed on in Ankara with the blessings of the UN, the G-8 and the regional powers adds to the countless crimes that have been committed in the context of the Iraq war. The victims of US-backed Turkish military attacks will not be limited to the fighters of the PKK, who have sought refuge in Iraq, but will include the wider Kurdish population in Iraq and Turkey, as well as the Turkish

working class.

The Kurds are to be sacrificed as pawns in order to dampen—temporarily—the tensions between the US and Turkey.

The *World Socialist Web Site* emphatically opposes the offensive by Turkey and the US against the PKK. The PKK is not a terrorist organisation, but a mass nationalist organisation that has won influence and support due to decades of oppression of the Kurdish population, which continues to this day.

The cynicism of the actions against the PKK is shown by the fact that the US brands the PKK as terrorists, yet simultaneously supports the PJAK, an organisation of Iranian Kurds that collaborates closely with the PKK. The PJAK is operating against Iran from the Qandil mountains. Which armed groups Washington brands as “terrorist organisations” and suppresses and which it regards as “liberation fighters” and supports depend entirely on US imperialism’s current foreign policy interests.

The military strikes Turkey is planning against the PKK are aimed at subjugating the entire Kurdish people. Inevitably, the attacks will also affect the civilian population and extend into new areas the violence and destruction that have already devastated Afghanistan and large parts of Iraq.

It is questionable whether the local population will submissively accept a Turkish military incursion, even if it is agreed by prominent Iraqi Kurdish politicians. Relations are strained between the Kurdish population and the two parties that dominate northern Iraq—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) of Masud Barzani, the head of the northern Iraq regional government. Both parties are based on tribal structures and represent the interests of a narrow elite.

Within Turkey, the poison of anti-Kurdish chauvinism pollutes the political atmosphere. Based on the campaign against the PKK, the generals once again have gained the upper hand after having suffered one political defeat after another. The AKP won the elections in the summer because many voters regarded it as a democratic counterweight to the military. Now, Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul have given the military a blank cheque and placed themselves in the generals’ hands.

The witch-hunt against the Kurds carried out in the course of the campaign against the PKK has jeopardised the limited cultural concessions to the Kurdish population in Turkey made by the AKP government. In recent days, some pogrom-like attacks on Kurdish facilities have taken place in Turkey. There have also been clashes between Turks and Kurds living abroad. In Berlin, nationalist Turks attacked a Kurdish cultural centre. At the weekend, thousands demonstrated in Germany both in support of and in opposition to a Turkish invasion of Iraq.

Our opposition to the attack on the PKK does not mean, however, that we support its nationalist politics and methods. The PKK does not have an answer to the historical oppression of the Kurdish people; their methods make it easier for the ruling elite in Ankara to drive a wedge between the Turkish and Kurdish masses; it has repeatedly struck unprincipled agreements with the Turkish government and even welcomed the American invasion of Iraq.

It is not the first time that the Kurds have been the victims of the machinations of the great and regional powers in the Middle East. The history of the Kurds is replete with such tragedies. This history demonstrates the impossibility of solving the problems of national oppression and achieving the tasks of the democratic revolution within the context of a bourgeois nationalist perspective.

The state borders in today’s Middle East were drawn across the remnants of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War by the victorious imperialist powers. Britain and France had already agreed in 1916, in a secret treaty (the Sykes-Picot Agreement), on a demarcation of their spheres of influence. In the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), they arbitrarily

drew borders through deserts and across mountains, playing off different peoples against each other and installing their favoured ruling families in power.

Before the war, the British Empire had already tried to position the Kurds against the Ottoman Empire in order to control the oil-rich province of Mosul. The Treaty of Sèvres envisaged the Kurds having their own state, with one also for the Armenians. But of Turkey, only a rump was to remain.

The Turkish nationalists under Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) rebelled against this, forcing a revision of the Treaty of Sèvres in a three-year war of liberation. The British, who had succeeded in adding Mosul province to the Iraq they controlled, now lost their interest in the Kurds.

This is how Turkey’s present borders emerged. The Kurds, now some 26 million people, did not gain their own state. Divided between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, they have repeatedly faced brutal oppression.

The Kemalists were unable to provide a democratic solution for the problems of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, in which the most varied peoples and religions had lived together for centuries. The war of liberation ended with the driving out and resettlement of huge population groups.

One and a half million Greeks had to leave Turkey, and half a million Turks left Greece. More than 1 million Armenians had already been killed or driven out by 1915.

The Kurds, constituting about one fifth of the population of Turkey, received no minority rights. In modern Turkey, there would be only “Turks.” To this day, calling for Kurdish culture to be recognised or for the genocide against the Armenians to be acknowledged can result in brutal state retribution.

All attempts to change the established borders have resulted in bloody disputes and threatened to involve the imperialist powers. The nationalist Kurdish parties, which seek their own Kurdish state, have proved time and again they are willing instruments of various imperialist interests. This applies not only to Barzani’s KDP and the PUK of Talabani, which are deeply anchored in the traditional tribal structures and can therefore be manipulated particularly easily, but also to the PKK, whose origins in Maoism and Stalinism mean that it ascribes absolute priority to the national question over the class question.

The history of the two largest Iraqi Kurd organisations is one of intrigues and betrayal. Both have tried to attain their goals by offering their services to one or another great or regional power. This has not only brought them into conflict with other peoples in the region, but has also divided the Kurdish national movement itself.

In most regional conflicts, Kurdish groups have stood on both sides of the battle lines. The wars of the Kurds against the regional powers were nearly always also Kurdish civil wars. And when the Kurds had played their part, they were once more abandoned by their protecting powers. The Kurdish population has paid a high price for this.

Particularly in the conflicts between the Gulf states—Iran and Iraq—encouraged by US imperialism, the Kurds were a useful instrument of manoeuvre and served as cannon fodder. In the 1960s and 1970s, Mustafa Barzani, the father of today’s regional president, fought against the nationalist Baath regime in Baghdad with the support of the Shah of Iran, the CIA and Israel, which supplied large quantities of weaponry and money. In return, Barzani supported the Shah in the forcible suppression of the rebellious Iranian Kurds.

In 1975, surprisingly, the Shah and the Baath regime settled their differences during an OPEC conference in Algiers. The Shah halted his support of the Iraqi Kurds, closed the border and cut off the weapons supply to Barzani’s fighters, as well as their lines of retreat. As a result, Barzani’s rebellion completely collapsed and the Iraqi Kurds suffered terrible repression.

In the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-1988, Kurds fought on both sides: Iranian

Kurds and Talabani's Iraqi PUK on the Iraqi side against Barzani's KDP, which aligned itself on the Iranian side. Again, the KDP took part directly in the suppression of Iranian Kurds.

The war had hardly ended when both Teheran and Baghdad despatched the troops that had now become available against the Kurds within the own countries. Revenge was brutal and bloody. In Halabja in Iraq, 5,000 civilians fell victim to a poison gas attack. Some 160,000 Kurds had to flee from Iraq into Turkey and Iran.

After the Gulf War of 1991, the KDP and PUK hitched the fate of the Iraqi Kurds completely to that of American imperialism. The no-fly zone imposed over the north of Iraq made possible a wide-ranging autonomy for them.

In the Iraq war of 2003, they stood on the side of the American aggressor and have been the most important prop for the occupation regime since then. This alliance with an imperialist great power, which is seeking to control the oil reserves of the Gulf, has brought death and destruction to the Iraqi population, and is preparing a war against Iran—and is therefore deeply hated—will have further tragic consequences for the Kurdish population.

The origins of the PKK go back to the student protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Following a period of rapid industrialisation, Turkey witnessed a wave of labour disputes and a radicalisation of the youth after 1968.

In the universities, numerous nationalist organisations were active, claiming to follow the teachings of Mao, Che Guevara or the guerrilla tactics of the Viet Cong. It was out of this movement that the PKK emerged.

It opposed a joint struggle of the Kurdish and Turkish working class against the ruling elite—something that was altogether possible at that time. The PKK demanded an independent Kurdish state and insisted that the social struggles of the working class and the peasantry had to cede priority to the national struggle. The PKK's founding programme stressed the absolute priority of the national question: "As long as national contradictions remain unresolved, no other social contradiction can be solved," it states.

The PKK gained a following only as a result of the brutal repression by the Turkish state. The government of Social Democrat Bülent Ecevit encouraged national chauvinism in order to overcome the increasing militancy in the working class and among the youth. In 1978, he imposed martial law in the Kurdish provinces.

In 1980, the military seized power and meted out brutal terror against every opposition. The repression was particularly violent in the Kurdish regions, where arrests and torture often took place without any reason. Even 12-year-old children were abused.

The PKK went to Lebanon, where it fought alongside the PLO, and established training camps in the Syrian-controlled Bekaa Valley. Its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, lived in Damascus, where he was tolerated by the Syrian regime.

In 1984, the PKK began an armed struggle against the Turkish army, which responded with extreme brutality. By 1990, some 2,500 Kurdish villages had been evacuated and the population forcibly resettled. The Turkish government recruited so-called "village guards" through bribery and threats, who were used against the PKK. Altogether, the war claimed 35,000 victims.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, which deprived the Syrian regime of Soviet support, the situation facing the PKK became increasingly precarious. It reacted by seeking a cease-fire and the support of the imperialist powers whom it had previously condemned. Jalal Talabani served as its intermediary, alternately meeting with PKK leader Öcalan, Turkish President Özal, and then-US President George Bush, the elder.

But President Özal, who had signalled willingness for a rapprochement,

was unable to deliver. The Turkish ruling class imposed further bitter repression.

Now, Öcalan's appeals to the imperialist powers, in particular, to Europe, became ever more abject. At a press conference with Talabani in 1993, he announced a unilateral cease-fire and abandoned the demand for a Kurdish state. But the Turkish military resumed the war against the Kurds with remorseless cruelty.

In 1998, Turkish pressure meant Öcalan had to leave Syria. As not a single country was willing to grant him asylum, he was arrested in Kenya with the support of the CIA and brought to Turkey, where he is now serving a life sentence.

Since then, the PKK has undergone several splits and name changes. It vacillates between unilateral cease-fires and offers of collaboration with the Turkish government, and the resumption of the armed struggle. For the first time, in the recent parliamentary elections, candidates of the Kurdish party DTP, which is sympathetic to the PKK, received fewer votes in the Kurdish regions than the governing AKP. The PKK then stepped up its military activities. Many observers attribute this to the fact that it is losing its following and hopes that a polarisation of the situation will bring it more support.

America's ruthless actions against Iraq have destabilised the entire Middle East. All of the unresolved historical questions of the past century are once again resurfacing.

Six years after the occupation of Afghanistan and four and a half years after the conquest of Iraq by a US-led alliance, a conflagration looms in the Middle East that threatens to transform the entire region into a military inferno and could become the spark for a world war, should the Bush administration carry out its threat to attack Iran.

These developments will have far-reaching consequences for politics in Turkey. The ruling elite in Turkey was politically always very weak. For many decades, it neither pursued an active foreign policy nor was able to develop genuinely democratic forms of rule at home.

After the Second World War, Turkey lined up behind the US. As NATO's eastern flank, the country occupied a strategic position in the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

Domestically, it relied alternately on authoritarian regimes with a parliamentary façade or open military dictatorships. The military formed a state within a state, and considered itself the guardian of the Kemalist heritage. It always intervened when the class war got out of control, and four times it carried out coups, the last one in 1980. At that time, thousands of trade unionists and left-wing activists were arrested and tortured, or simply disappeared.

The international situation has changed completely for Turkey with the end of the Cold War and the launching of the US war in Iraq. The US has been transformed from a factor for stability into a destabilising force. At the same time, Turkey's economic weight has grown.

Thanks to the inflow of international capital, the country's economy has become the second largest in the Middle East. With 71 million inhabitants, it is the 18th-largest economy in the world. The Turkish army is the second largest in NATO, behind that of the US.

In view of increasing differences with the US, and its disappointed hope for membership in the European Union, Turkey is stepping up its role as an independent regional power. Several commentaries have drawn attention to this fact.

Under the headline, "Turkey Rediscovered the Middle East," the July/August edition of the magazine *Foreign Affairs* writes, "a significant shift in the country's foreign policy has gone largely unnoticed: after decades of passivity, Turkey is now emerging as an important diplomatic actor in the Middle East."

In an analysis published October 23, *Stratfor.com* comes to the conclusion: "Turkey should be viewed as a rapidly emerging regional power—or, in the broadest sense, as beginning the process of creating a

regional hegemon of enormous strategic power, based in Asia Minor but projecting political, economic and military forces in full circle.”

The threat of a military offensive in northern Iraq must be seen in this context. The question of the PKK is really only a pretext. The establishment of an independent or largely autonomous Kurdish state in northern Iraq, which seems more and more likely with the collapse of the authority of the Iraqi central government, is completely unacceptable to the Turkish elite. It could encourage separatist tendencies in Turkey, where three times as many Kurds live as in Iraq, and place a question mark over the territorial integrity of the Turkish state.

In particular, Ankara wants to prevent the city of Kirkuk being assimilated into the autonomous Kurdish region, as is proposed in a referendum planned for the end of the year. With its enormous oil reserves, the centre of northern Iraqi oil production could provide the economic basis for a Kurdish state. There has been no accord so far on this matter between Turkey and the US.

There are considerations in Washington that to control the Middle East it is necessary to rely on Turkey more heavily than before. The articles in *Foreign Affairs* and *Stratfor* point in this direction. That can only be done, however, if concessions are made to Ankara at the expense of the Kurds. Joint American-Turkish action against the PKK points in this direction.

Turkey’s aggressive foreign policy also intensifies the class contradictions at home. It is bound up with aggressive attacks on the social and democratic rights of the working class.

The hopes in liberal circles that the AKP would diminish the influence of the generals and introduce greater democracy have proved to be an illusion. Their war-mongering against the PKK has made Erdogan and Gul the mouthpieces of the military.

The present circumstances in the Middle East recall the situation in the Balkans 100 years ago, when several states were fighting over the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The conflicts that were manipulated by the Great Powers resulted in the two Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913. The “third Balkan war,” sparked by the assassination of Crown Prince Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, supplied the catalyst for the First World War.

The then-31-year-old Leon Trotsky, a leading Marxist of his day, wrote on the eve of this war: “State unity of the Balkan Peninsula can be achieved one of two ways: either from above, by expanding one Balkan state, whichever proves strongest, at the expense of weaker ones—this is the road of wars of extermination and oppression of weak nations, a road that consolidates monarchism and militarism; or from below, through the peoples themselves coming together—this is the road of revolution, the road that means overthrowing the Balkan dynasties and unfurling the banner of a Balkan federal republic.”

These words have lost none of their actuality. The disintegration of Yugoslavia meant that the nationalist horrors of the past were repeated in the Balkans. The petty states that have arisen since then more resemble a series of prison cells than the embodiment of equality and democracy. They have become the pawns of the great powers and are a constant source of conflict between the Balkan peoples.

The Middle East confronts a similar fate. Only the unification of the working class across all national and ethnic divisions can prevent this. Its goal must be a Socialist Federation of the Middle East. The defence of the social and democratic rights of the working class, the eradication of national discrimination and oppression, and the struggle against imperialism and its regional stooges are inseparable.

The Turkish working class requires a new leadership. The Kemalists, who under Bülent Ecevit still pretended to be social democrats, have become the most odious war-mongers. The same applies to the official union Turk-Is, which has even offered the government to forgo all union activities so long as the problem of “terrorism” (meaning the PKK) is not resolved.

It is time a section of the International Committee of the Fourth International is built in Turkey. The ICFI and its international publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, stand in the unbroken tradition of the Trotskyist Left Opposition and the Fourth International against Stalinism. They have defended the Marxist perspective of proletarian internationalism against every form of nationalism.

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