

# If Trump pulls out of Syria, then Rojava's revolution will be threatened

by Mohammed Elnaiem - 21/12/2018 14:33



By the 12th of December, Erdogan made it expressly clear that the United States had given Turkey a green-light to invade Kurdish held territory in Syria. For years, Turkey threatened to either be soft on Iran, or fall under Russia's influence, if it wasn't supported in its aim of destroying the Rojava Revolution.

"We are determined to turn the east of the Euphrates into a peaceful and livable place for its true owners", Erdogan said. Since invading Afrin, Turkey and its so-called "Free Syrian Army" proxies have been accused, even by Human Rights Watch, of taking "seized, destroyed, and looted residential property", and instituting a regime of de-facto apartheid which discriminates against Kurds living on their land. "There is no longer any such threat as Daesh", Erdogan concluded, as he threatened to invade the rest of the Democratic Federation.

Two days after Erdogan's announcement, the Turkish air force bombed civilian settlements in Sinjar and Makhmour. Four civilians died, including a 73-year old

Kurdish grandmother, and her 14-year-old granddaughter. Then on Tuesday, Washington announced that it was selling \$3.5 billion's worth of Patriot air and missile defence systems to Turkey. This wasn't an easy task, for Turkey was threatening to break Nato's code of interoperability by buying weapons for Russia, a bargaining chip it often used to attack Syria's Kurds.

The following day, Donald Trump promised, on Wednesday that the United States had begun withdrawing its 2,000 U.S troops from the United States. "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there", Donald Trump tweeted.

### A clear outcome

It was already clear to the Kurds that this outcome was going to transpire from the very beginning. Kurds have etched out a radical democratic project in northern Syria, to the alarm of Turkey, since at least 2012. Turkey from the very beginning has consistently been trying to undermine the project, and since 2016, it has been doing so militarily with the help of its Free Syrian Army proxies. In 2018, Turkey tested the non-existent "red-lines" of Europe and the U.S by invading the enclave of Afrin, which up until then was a relatively peaceful haven in a country ravaged by seven years of civil war. At the time of writing, it is still under occupation.

And the United States – which at least since 2015, has been arming Kurds in the fight against IS – has done nothing to stop the ongoing assault, even having the audacity to continue to insist that Kurds remain stationed in the east of Syria to fight the last remnants of IS. It is important to note why the U.S. is trying to ally itself both with the Kurds and the government of Turkey. Back in 2015, while outgunned and with recourse only to the mountains, the Kurds of Kobane in northern Syria held their own against a massive assault by IS. The world watched, and when the U.S realised their fighting potential, a decisive victory was won with the aid of U.S airstrikes. Since then, the United States has entered into a tactical relationship with the Kurds. As for Turkey, it suffices to say that both are members of Nato, the same imperialist outfit, and its relationship with Ankara will always outweigh its ties with Syria's leftist Kurds.

Indeed, the attitude of the United States towards the Kurds has been clear from the very beginning:

(i) The United States was concerned with one key geopolitical aim and one key domestic aim. It wanted to thwart Iranian expansion, and did so under the guise of an anti IS fight. Washington also wanted to show its populous that it was playing its part in the battle against IS, but without having to send more troops. It decided, therefore, that in its eyes, the lesser brown peoples: the Kurds, could play that role in the fight.

This is no different to the old British and French policy of sending colonial subjects to the front lines in both world wars, or the U.S strategy in Vietnam of over-representing black people in the draft.

(ii) Washington has consistently shown itself to criminalise the very people it only sees as cannon fodder in the fight against IS. It did so, for example, by setting bounties on the arrest of many of the individuals that the Kurds in the conflict in Syria see as their ideological leadership.

(iii) The United States has consistently provided Turkey with the green-light to conduct military operations against it's so-called ally fighting IS

(iv) The United States and European powers – indeed almost every power which calls itself a participant in the fight against IS – has provided arms to Turkey, which Erdogan's government has happily used in its own southeast and across the border. The United States, and the so-called international community, has also facilitated these attacks.

(v) When it comes to the volunteers, the many who gave up their lives – be they from Kobani, or London – who fought for the revolution, and died, little memorialization or care by the so-called international coalition against IS has been demonstrated. On the contrary, the United States and European powers have shown their attitude towards them, by criminalising those who successfully make it back, and putting them on anti-terror trials.

Thus, from the perspective of Washington, the Kurds were to play only one role: to fight against IS, and be abandoned when it was decided that this fight was done. But from the perspective of the Kurds, who would play an instrumental role in forging the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the sole purpose of being able to negotiate their own existence, and prevent further IS genocides was the reason to enter into a temporary relationship. The Kurds decided to defend their lives in the face of a global international system, which has ever often conspired against their existence. But the Kurdish leftist forces who played an instrumental role in the near-defeat of IS in Syria are rooted in the anti-imperialist left, and they pledge allegiance to the ideology of Abdullah Ocalan, the co-founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). They have never hid this, thus drawing a line between themselves and the United States, which for decades has betrayed their calls for radical democracy and self-governance.

How to approach the withdrawal?

On all points recounted above, the criminalization of Kurdish communities, the criminalization of foreign fighters, the continuation of the arms trade, the

acquiescence towards Turkey's demand – all of these have led the Kurds and their friends to play the role of taking the anti-imperialist fight to Europe and the U.S. And yet, it may seem ironic, that the strategy of the hour is to ensure that the U.S. does not withdraw prematurely.

But this is truly the correct anti-imperialist approach for the hour. That anti-imperialism which celebrates Donald Trump's pull out for Syria, in fact, ought to be called the anti-imperialism of fools. And we ought to call this an anti-imperialism of fools, precisely because a bullet is still a bullet, and a massacre is still a massacre, whether or not it comes from the American or Turkish bayonet. We ought to call this an anti-imperialism of fools because the tunnel-vision of condemning US imperialism, while staying silent on Turkey's own imperial ambitions in West Asia is hypocrisy of the highest order. We ought to call this an anti-imperialism of fools because one imperial power has outsourced its presence to its own Nato ally. We ought to call it thus because this latest move by Trump on Wednesday is a sleight of hand, the U.S has "pulled out", but Nato has not. Turkey has just switched places with Washington, and it promises that with its presence, it will not just use Kurds in the American way, but murder Kurdish people in the AKP way. Most importantly though, this is anti-imperialism of fools because it is not anti-imperialist at all. It is merely an ideological excuse for yet again, abandoning the Kurds.

### Redefining Anti-imperialism

It is perhaps best to think of the anti-imperialism which much of the left adopts today as emanating from two streams, for simplicity's sake, that of the Spanish Civil War, and that of the war against Vietnam. Today, those who call themselves strictly non-interventionists are inheriting the strategy against U.S imperialism from the cold war but generalising it to the present. These are the roots of the contemporary anti-war movement when it made sense that to be anti-war was to be merely anti-U.S imperialism. But it is inadequate, ideologically, to take this approach in the present, when many imperial powers are vying for control in the Middle East, including those indigenous to the region.

We must go earlier to find the poetry of our resistance today. When the coup of the 19th of July took place in 1936 in Spain, the left looked at the British and French response of explicit "Non-Intervention" to the counter-revolution in Spain as one of cowardice. This too is part of the anti-imperialist tradition.

Indeed, in August 1936, it was Britain and France who refused to do anything about the Francoist takeover of Spain, when they signed an agreement with Germany and Italy. This so-called "Non-Intervention" pact demonstrated another face to

Imperialism: sometimes, the expressed act of doing nothing is in itself a strategy adopted by the Imperialist powers, in order to secure their own imperialist interests. We saw this very early on when the United States refused, for instance, to do anything for those being bombarded by Assad's barrel bombs, shifting their strategy against IS. We saw the same with the U.S. refusal to do anything in the face of Turkish invasions against Kurdish-led democracy in Afrin. Nor do the parallels end there. The US allows for Turkey's incursions into Kurdish territory to prevent Ankara from falling under Russian influence. In 1936, Britain and France also saw the Francoist takeover in a positive light, with a similar attitude towards potential USSR influence on the young republicans in power.

The British hoped Franco would win, they were wary of entering into a protracted war with Germany, Italy and Japan, and they felt that Franco would defend the capital and private property in Spain, which they had invested into heavily. In other words, the conservative administration sympathised with fascism. As Helen Graham has argued, the British even compared Spain's republican government, to Kerensky's before the Bolshevik revolution, thinking that they had warded off a potential communist threat. Leon Blum, the so-called socialist of France, refused to provide military support to socialists fighting Franco in Spain, in fears of being alienated by the French conservative elite he shared government with. It was the Soviet Union, which also initially supported the pact, who essentially laid the groundwork for resistance – and indeed an intervention – when it became clear that the Spanish Republic would fall.

Let us then think of the tens of thousands of leftists who would volunteer in the defence of the Republic of Spain. They did so recognise that if their governments, even their own imperialist governments, would not send forces to Spain, which many hopelessly campaigned for, then they would fight themselves. As a popular front against fascism was beginning to develop across the world, many leftists understood that the reluctant support of their own governments in the face of a fascist threat was the strategy to be adopted for the hour. Indeed, some of the African American's who volunteered to fight in Spain, did so, not mainly because they supported the USSR, but because they knew Italy was supporting Franco, and they knew that Italy was trying to invade Ethiopia. As one fighter put it, "This ain't Ethiopia, but it'll do". To them, once again, non-intervention wasn't the correct position but was the position of cowardice. And if they were to join the Soviet Intervention, at least some didn't agree with the policies of even the Soviet Union.

Eventually, those who joined the popular front against the emerging menace of fascism, would end up supporting the allied fight against Fascism. Was this too a

betrayal of their principles? Was it not these very powers that betrayed Spain? No. For those who supported the fight against Japan, Italy, Germany – even as Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union were in the allied fight, they were painfully aware that Britain was starving India and colonizing the world, that the Soviet Union had often betrayed their own comrades when it was geopolitically expedient, and that the United States was still lynching black people on trees. But the temporary support with the imperialist powers was a strategy to end fascism. And this strategic outlook was in no way a compromise on principals. It was flexibility to the geopolitical situation, that seems forgotten by many leftists today.

Most importantly these were people who considered themselves anti-imperialists, and yet also understood that imperialism was itself a multi-faceted phenomenon. That the world was not the US and Europe vs the rest, and that tactical considerations meant either filling in the vacuum left by imperialist caution or later, providing qualified support to those powers engaged in an inter-imperialist rivalry, if it meant defending your revolutionary comrades. The hard realities of realpolitik, stood against ideological purity for most, and even Trotskyists and Anarchists in Spain were willing to accept arms from the very power which, at least in their eyes, was responsible for the massacres of their comrades in Kronstadt and Ukraine, or in the case of Trotskyists, for degenerating what they believed was ostensibly a worker's state. In the fight against Franco, many of these leftists put their differences aside to say "No Pasaran". Today, it is Turkey that ought not to pass.

Whatever interpretation one has of the USSR, in the case of the fight in Spain, or of the allied powers in World War 2, the key lesson is this: people took arms from forces they didn't agree with, in order to fight for revolutionary principles and processes that ought to survive. They always knew that survival meant to temporarily dance with the devil, especially when lives were at stake. That devil might be a coloniser, that devil might be engaged in the very crimes that the revolution being defended is fighting against. But survival is dictated by realpolitik, and the only buffer between Turkey and the Kurds today are 2,000 U.S military personnel.

We must distinguish ourselves from those parts of the U.S. establishment which hope to see a permanent presence of the U.S. Those democratic and Republican senators, for instance, who say that the withdrawal is premature because it will endanger Israel, or will fail to ward off Iranian expansion. We say that it is precisely our anti-imperialist principles, which pushes us to prevent another front being opened by Turkey's imperialist, and neo-ottoman ambitions.

Seen from this light, here are just a few reasons why nobody is cheerleading for the United States. There is only a tactical appeal to ensure that a premature withdrawal

from the United States does not pave the way for a Turkish invasion. Everybody wants an inevitable withdrawal, one that ensures the gains made by the revolution are fully defended. But until Ankara and the AKP government promises not to attack Kurds in order to shore up domestic support. Until it shows a willingness to restart the peace process within its own borders, frees dissidents from its jails, and lifts a perpetual state of emergency used to prevent worker's organisation, then the Kurds of Syria will always be at threat. And Turkey's foreign policy is just as imperialist as that of Russia, or the United States. Should the anti-war movement not understand this, then it will be ironically paving the way for the next war: the war between Turkey and Syria's Kurds.