

Trump reaffirms the U.S. war on Kurdistan

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Over the course of the past six weeks, the Trump administration has confirmed a most basic fact which had been often overlooked, confused or distorted since the United States entered Syria in 2015, ostensibly to combat the Islamic State.

This reality is that despite the ‘tactical’ military cooperation that has existed between the U.S. and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Washington remains – as it always has – in a state of actual war with the Kurdish Freedom Movement, namely Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), despite the American Special Representative for Syria James Jeffrey admitting links between the U.S. local partner and PKK.

Therefore, when news headlines make reference to Trump abruptly deciding to pull the 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria as a ‘betrayal’ to ‘the Kurds’, it obscures the fundamental truth that actually, such a betrayal was never possible.

It only would have been possible if the cooperation between the YPG/J-led SDF and

the U.S. in the fight against the Islamic State wasn't based on a temporary intersection of interests and instead on principles and a long-term vision. In other words, if the short-term military objectives extended to political ones. They never did.

In fact, in the ideological realm, the United States and the Kurdish Freedom Movement stand worlds apart, so much so that to say they are diametrically opposed is closer to reality than to posture that they are somehow fighting for the same conception of 'freedom'.

The notion of freedom to the ruling class of U.S. imperialism is one based on the exploitative order of global capitalism and the ability for Washington to penetrate markets across the world.

For the YPG/J and the political leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), capitalism is a remnant of the past which is to be replaced with an egalitarianism rooted in democratic modernity, women's liberation and ecology. These two visions are deeply at odds with each other.

Thus, the writing has been on the wall since the very beginning of the tentative cooperation which reached its peak with the defeat of the Islamic State in Raqqa in October 2017, after which the U.S. reacted furiously to the display of a banner of Abdullah Ocalan in the city centre.

This writing has only become clear for the world to see in the most recent period. It has unfolded over Three Acts, which are actually just the latest chapters in a long war the United States had waged against the socialist-inclined forces of Kurdistan and the wider region.

Act I: Bounties on the PKK

On November 6, the U.S. Embassy in Ankara announced that massive bounties were to be placed on three leaders of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The rewards for information on Murat Karayilan (up to \$5 million), Cemil Bayik (up to \$4 million), and Duran Kalkan (up to \$3 million) were made after a visit to Turkey by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Palmer.

The rewards were largely viewed as a means of the U.S. attempting to appease Turkey and its President Erdogan due to a souring of the relationship between the largest armies in NATO over recent years.

Given that Turkey had long claimed that the U.S. was aiding the PKK in Syria (due to the fact that the PYD is a sister party of the PKK that follows the same ideology of democratic confederalism), the bounties were essentially an olive branch to prove to

Turkey that the U.S. had never actually abandoned its ally.

It's important to understand that as U.S. weapons were being given to Kurdish forces in Syria, those same weapons were being used to murder their comrades within the borders of Iraq and Turkey.

One key example was the August assassination of Zekî Âžengali, a high-ranking Yezidi member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) and PKK in Shengal, Iraq by Turkish forces – a murder which was committed due to intelligence given to Ankara by the U.S.

In the aftermath of the decision to impose the bounties, the KCK issued a statement in which it said “This unwarranted decision by the U.S. is a continuation of the international plot against Leader Apo. Our people and forces of democracy must rise up at once against the attack that is part of the plot.”

In other words, the KCK took the long view of history, understanding that the imperialist leopard had never changed its spots in the almost 20 years since the CIA and Clinton administration played a key role in the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

Act II: Patriot Missile Sales to Turkey

Preceding the second major act by the U.S. in the run-up to Trump's sudden decision on American military personnel in Syria were bombing campaigns by the Turkish state in Iraq that targeted Shengal and the Mexmur Refugee Camp, where three women and one young girl were killed on December 11. This was a blatant attack against areas with massive civilian populations, including those who had been targeted by the ethnic cleansing campaigns of the Islamic State in recent years.

Again, the KCK responded by asserting that the United States had to bear some responsibility for Turkey's actions, writing that “As in the First World War, today's attacks by the Turkish state on the Kurds and other peoples of the region will not take place without the knowledge and consent of international and regional powers. Iraqi airspace is under US control. Without the consent of the US, such air strikes are not possible.”

But it's isn't only U.S. control of Iraqi airspace which is fueling the war on the PKK, and by extension the revolutionary Kurdish movement for self-determination. The Second Act which really drove home that the fundamental mission of U.S. imperialism has never shifted in the region was delivered hours after Trump's decision on withdrawing forces from Syria, in which the State Department authorised

the sale of \$3.5 billion worth of Patriot Missiles to Turkey.

Although technically coming after Trump's announcement (via Twitter), it can be assumed that the State Department decision had been finalised for some time.

Much attention was paid to the fact that the decision was taken in light of a U.S.-Turkey row over Erdogan's decision to purchase an S-400 system from Russia. Although certainly the decision helps to mitigate tensions within the NATO alliance, and some of the motivation has to be to prevent Turkey from moving further into the sphere of Russian influence, it also hardly breaks with the consistent policy of State Department aid to Turkey's war on the PKK.

In typical imperial-bullying, the U.S. warned Turkey that not purchasing the Patriot Missiles could result in the non-sale of F-35 jets -- which, of course, would be used to conduct airstrikes on the PKK.

Act III: The Phone Call, Withdrawal & Coming Invasion

Trump's tweet last Monday that announced that the United States would be leaving Syria sent shockwaves across foreign policy circles and the mainstream media in the U.S.

According to the Associated Press, the decision was hastily made by Trump – against the wishes of his advisors – during a telephone call with Erdogan on December 14. The call was held due to talks the previous day between Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu about Turkey's plan to invade and occupy territory held by the Kurdish forces in northern Syria.

During the call, Erdogan reportedly asked Trump why the U.S. was still in Syria despite the fact that the Islamic State had been defeated, to which Trump turned to national security advisor John Bolton for assistance.

According to the AP report, "Bolton was forced to admit, [what Erdogan said] had been backed up by Mattis, Pompeo, U.S. special envoy for Syria Jim Jeffrey and special envoy for the anti-ISIS coalition Brett McGurk, who have said that IS retains only 1 percent of its territory."

With that, Trump pledged a withdrawal of U.S. forces, basically granting Erdogan a gift that he apparently didn't see coming. The AP reported that "caught off guard, Erdogan cautioned Trump against a hasty withdrawal, according to one official. While Turkey has made incursions into Syria in the past, it does not have the necessary forces mobilised on the border to move in and hold the large swaths of northeastern Syria where U.S. troops are positioned, the official said."

Divisions in the U.S. Establishment

Trump's decision stunned the U.S. establishment, and understandably fears across much of the Kurdish community, with concern that Trump had effectively green-lighted a Turkish invasion of Rojava that could result in a much more widespread ethnic cleansing than the one we saw in Afrin nearly a year ago.

The immediate aftermath of Trump's decision was met with resistance by both Republicans and Democrats in the halls of power. But their dissent had nothing to do with the fact that these political forces were 'friends of the Kurds' – even if they attempted to posture themselves that way – but rather with the fact that when it comes to the military industrial complex, war is a bipartisan affair.

For example, let's take the outrage of Republican Senator Marco Rubio who tweeted that, "Without our help Kurds will have to go home to prepare to fight Turks. With no one on the ground hitting ISIS they will regroup & expand plots to attack Americans. We weren't in Syria to help anyone else. We were in Syria to wipe out terrorists who want to kill Americans."

While Rubio is indeed correct about the Islamic State having the opportunity to regroup, and that 'the Kurds' (i.e. the YPG and YPJ) would have to abandon the Deir ez-Zor front to fight an Erdogan invasion (as was the case in Afrin earlier this year), he also makes it clear that the U.S. has been there for its own motivations.

After all, this is coming from Rubio, an extremely right-wing political figure who has built much of his career off of opposing the socialist governments in Cuba and Venezuela, as well as much of the rest of Latin America. Therefore, it's no wonder that Rubio's interests have nothing to do with the ideology of what he quite disrespectfully calls 'the Kurds', but rather with the geopolitical motivations of U.S. power in the region.

A more honest assessment of U.S. interests could be found in Secretary of Defence James 'Mad Dog' Mattis, who chose to resign as a consequence of Trump's decision.

According to the New York Times, "Mr. Mattis went to the White House with his resignation letter already written, but nonetheless made a last attempt at persuading the president to reverse his decision about Syria, which Mr. Trump announced on Wednesday over the objections of his senior advisers. Mr. Mattis, a retired four-star Marine general, was rebuffed. Returning to the Pentagon, he asked aides to print out 50 copies of his resignation letter and distribute them around the building."

Mattis also has little love for the socialist rhetoric and ideology of the PYD and the

YPG/J, but has been guided by a policy of realpolitik that is rooted largely in opposing Iran in the region. This doesn't mean that Mattis is any more 'progressive' than Trump; his entire career has been based on furthering the objectives of the U.S. empire on a global stage, particularly in the so-called 'Middle East.'

As the Morning Star put it in an editorial published on December 21, "Let us be clear. Any measure that limits the power of the United States to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries is, without qualification, a good thing... The career of this man Mattis is a Cook's Tour of US military adventures. His first foreign foray was to protect Saudi Arabia in the 1990-91 Gulf war... In a subsequent deployment to Afghanistan, he buttressed this approach with an injunction to "be polite, be courteous and have a plan to kill everyone you meet."

The Revolution Can Only Be Strengthened

But what of the Rojava Revolution itself? Is it actually strong enough to withstand the withdrawal of the U.S military? Such a question can only really come from those who don't understand the thrust of what a real revolution entails.

First of all, the Rojava Revolution began long before the intervention of the U.S. into the sphere of anti-ISIS operations in Syria in 2015. It dates from the summer of 2012 but is, in reality, part of the Kurdish revolution and national liberation struggle that has its genesis in the foundation of the PKK in 1978.

The events that unfolded in northern Syria in 2012 with the declaration of autonomy and the withdrawal of the Syrian Arab Army could not have taken place without the decades of political work that was orchestrated by PKK cadres across the region for decades.

Contrary to those who have deemed the PYD and YPG/J as nothing more than U.S. proxies, PYD Diplomatic Relations Co-Chair Salih Muslim stated in light of Trump's announcement that "They weren't here to protect us in any case. We rely on our own strength and defence. We are at a point of legitimate self-defence. That much has never been lacking. It is their business to decide whether they stay or go. Our interests coincided, we acted together, but we never relied on them."

It is absolutely true that the U.S. withdrawal accelerates the threat of a Turkish invasion – in fact, it seems to be the case that the two are inextricably linked. This danger cannot be overstated and is very real.

Yet, in terms of the social revolution in Rojava, it could never actually succeed long-term while the U.S. remained in Syria. The U.S. presence was at best a necessary nuisance and arrangement with the devil, but at the worst meant the ever-consistent

attempts by Washington to water down the content of the social transformation.

One clear manifestation of this is the recent demand placed upon the Rojava authorities by the U.S. that they allow the so-called 'Rojava Peshmerga' to deploy to Syria. These are the armed forces affiliated with the Iraqi Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Masoud Barzani, who the PYD deem to be agents of the Turkish state.

The Road Forward

The road ahead will evidently be riddled with difficulties, as well as contradictions, just as the Rojava Revolution has been in its six and a half years to date.

There's no need to either aggressively cheerlead a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, just as there isn't a need to wallow in despair or appeal for the imperialists to remain.

As Dr. Hawzhin Azeez has said, "If you want freedom you have to take it! You cannot appeal to the conscience of the imperialists, the colonialists, the oppressors, and the creators of your dispossessed marginalised status. Your martyrs did not die for this ideology, they died fighting against it."

Syria has been in the midst of a small-scale third world war for almost eight years. Rojava has been the bastion of progress within that war for almost the whole of that period. We should reaffirm our commitment to the revolutionaries of Rojava just as the United States has reiterated where it really stands – on the side of the reactionaries of the region and the world.

Picking sides should be easier now than ever.