

IN THE GLASSHOUSE

NATO-member Turkey supports the rebels in Syria – yet persecutes the opposition movement in its own country

Norman Paech

Turkey is in a complex situation, which the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and his AKP government, seem to want to cover up. The incontestable economic successes – whereby the completely under-developed rights of the working population have been accepted – make the country a power factor between East and West. The strategic location of Turkey for the transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian region and the Middle East into Europe provides the ever-assertive government with a comfortable negotiating position with the Europeans. This clearly allows Ankara to bring EU-membership into play without having to compromise on the biggest obstacle to its membership so far – the unresolved Cyprus question. Greece is weak and is having its sovereignty rapidly taken away, almost degraded to a protectorate. Why back down against the EU and the UN, when, evidently, a politics of “banging one's fist on the table” is the only one honoured? This is also apparent in the fact that Erdogan can afford to pick a fight with a state, with which it not so long ago had a distinguished relationship – Israel, the EU's most controversial protégé. The dispute is on account of their treatment of the Palestinians – the kind of treatment that Erdogan himself commits in relation to the Kurds in his own country. Finally, Turkey's decades-long membership to NATO allows it to position itself against its long-standing ally and neighbour, Syria. It not only organised the intake of refugees, but it has offered Ankara as a forum for the rebels, in order to call for the overthrow of Bashar Al-Assad. Erdogan has opened its borders to the oppositional “Free Syrian Army” for the transfer of money, weapons and logistics to Syria. Whereas Qatar and Saudi Arabia provide the rebels with money, and the Western “Friends of Syria” strengthen the rebels' fighting capacity through the CIA and related organisations, as well as drive propaganda for “Regime Change” around the world, Turkey openly plays a role in the civil war against Assad's government and threatens invasion. The human rights imperative for neutrality in such a situation has long been ignored. What fell through for the “Friends of Syria” because of Russian and Chinese vetoes in the UN Security Council, they still manage to do through unofficial channels of infiltration, against which a veto is powerless.

One cannot deny the skill of the Erdogan government. Like it snubbed the EU through its confrontation in the Cyprus question and by standing up to Israel, it is doing its best to force the regime change in Damascus. Turkey is therefore indispensable for the strategic interests of the USA and the EU in the new order of the Middle East. That was the significance of their membership of NATO from the beginning, which has already proved itself in the war against Iraq.

However, this foreign policy tinged with militancy and nationalism is exploited above all in its own country. It distracts those overseas from a civil war, which for decades the Turkish government have led. Not once have the Turkish government offered a different answer to the demands of the Kurdish population for self-determination and equal rights other than the violence of the army, the police and the courts. There are always periods of hope for a peaceful political resolution. But then the government resorts to the military yet again, not afraid to commit serious war crimes with attacks on the civilian population and on the Iraqi region, as well as using poison gas.

Interested in stability

NATO has never concerned itself with the catastrophic situation of the people in the Kurdish part of their member state. It was only interested in the stability of its allies – be it at the cost of the oppression of a whole people. The other members of the military pact have accepted the stigmatised image of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, as a terrorist group, and therefore actively drive the handing over and isolation of its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. Through this support they have pushed forward the militarisation of the conflict, boycotting a political resolution, because one does not

negotiate with terrorists. The human rights agreement of the NATO states demands that they are involved deeply and conspicuously in the judicial proceedings of a foreign state – in Ukraine for example – to protect a woman who had come into enormous wealth through a gas company in the shortest time and still at a young age, and who as Prime Minister of the country had won the obvious affections of the West. But for the miserable situation of millions of Kurds, for the fight for their language, the recognition of their identity, their political, cultural and social rights, the human rights agreement evidently falls down.

The strategy of the AKP regime is only seemingly indecisive and contradictory. Last summer there was a series of talks between representatives of the national secret service, MIT, and the PKK leader, jailed on the prison-island Imrali, Abdullah Ocalan. Five meetings also took place with PKK representatives in Oslo. Ocalan broke the contacts due to their pointlessness and purposelessness, and, similarly, no substantial attempt at a political resolution was borne out of the Oslo talks. This was because at the same time the waves of arrests reached gigantic proportions. More than 7,000 Kurdish activists found themselves in the crowded jails – members of parliament, mayors, lawyers and journalists, as well as 2,300 youths. Reports of torture and rape, as well as several protests in the jails and the 50-day hunger strike of 1,500 prisoners early this year, leave no doubt in the miserable state of democracy and the justice system in Turkey. None of the “Copenhagen Criteria” for entry into the EU can be fulfilled in this situation. Also, the military activities of the army in North Kurdistan, in the South-East of Turkey, have been taken up again. The Erdogan government demands the Kurds to lay their weapons down before they can come to political negotiations. They are obviously under the illusion that the PKK could forget that the government disregarded their calls for a ceasefire, and answered their calls with their own military operations.

If Ankara does not definitely put a stop to military activities, there will be no end to this civil war. Because a result of the already decades-long conflict is that the Kurdish people has strengthened its resolve to resist, all attempts to separate, especially the isolation and separation of Abdullah Ocalan from the Kurdish movement, have failed. The government in Ankara, like the government in Tel Aviv, faces the same paradox. The greater the military attacks and the stronger the political repression, the greater the solidarity of the persecuted and the determination of the resistance becomes. That becomes clear not particularly in political or military successes against the government, rather in the breadth and depth of the people's resistance. The biggest weakness of the Kurdish movement, in comparison to the Palestinians, is its lack of international resonance. The label of terror is always stuck on them, which the PLO could not get rid of until the end of the 90s, even though they were recognised as a freedom movement by the UN already in 1974.

Their own strength

What is left for the Kurdish movement is to concentrate on their own strength, in order to assert their rights. The Erdogan government must be made clear on at least two points: that there will not be a military resolution, like the one in Sri Lanka against the Tamils; and that for a political resolution Ocalan must be released from his isolation. Dragged along since the days of the Ottoman Empire, the old trauma from Turkey's collapse, when it afforded its peoples self-determination and federal rights, must be overcome, and the accusations of separatism with every Kurdish movement must be shelved for good. Ocalan has already given up in the last century the calls for a Kurdish state, and replaced them with the demand for self-determination within the borders of Turkey. In addition, there is the example of a host of European states, whose solidarity is guaranteed by a federal constitution. The state of a civilisation is not really measured by Gross Domestic Product figures and the strength of the army, rather by the rights and freedoms that the people enjoy.

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