



May 3, 2021

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken
c/o Omar Almashhadany
Syria Desk Officer
Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs (NEA/LEV)
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St., NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

We are writing to urge you to revoke the renewal of the Trump administration's multi-million-dollar bounties on the heads of three leaders of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is connected by history and ideology to our allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). We hope that President Biden's discussions of human rights and his choice of Brett McGurk as head of National Security Policy for the Middle East and North Africa will end the incoherence and double-dealing of the Trump administration towards the Kurds. We request a phone meeting to discuss these matters.

U.S Bounties on PKK Leaders Should Be Revoked: In his foreign policy press conference on Feb. 4, 2021, President Biden said his foreign policy would be based on human rights. But posting bounties is a human rights violation. As Article Ten of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, "Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him." In addition, the bounties on Cemil Bayık, Duran Kalkan and Murat Karayılan are part of the strategy of Turkey's ruling party, the AKP, to hold power by manufacturing a terrorist threat. Their renewal is a signal to Turkey that it is acceptable to the United States if Turkey assassinates PKK leaders. This AKP strategy does not benefit the U.S. or the region, and we should not support it.

The bounty decision also undermines our alliance with the Kurds. Because Kurdish fighters, including military leaders trained by the PKK, were key to the SDF's struggle against ISIS, renewal of these bounties has prompted anger and confusion and encouraged distrust of the U.S. within the Kurdish freedom movement. Since the battle with ISIS is still far from won, it is short-sighted to alienate our most reliable ally. It is also contradictory to our hopes for the region, where we share Rojava's democratic, pluralistic goals and oppose authoritarianism.

Who Are the Real Terrorists in the Region? Most authorities define terrorism as acts of violence that target civilians. Turkey has a different definition, as shown by the thousands of academics, journalists, bloggers, and especially Kurds it has put in jail in the last three years.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is particularly intent on criminalizing members of the HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party), a progressive opposition party that defends the rights of women, Kurds, and other minorities. One hundred eight HDP politicians have been placed on trial because they supported the Syrian Kurds' resistance to ISIS in the 2014 battle of Kobane.

Far from opposing terrorism, Turkey supports it. Many researchers have documented Turkey's aid to ISIS during the war; Turkey has since bombed Rojava prisons holding ISIS members in order to help them escape. When Turkey invaded Rojava in January 2019, it used Islamist militias notorious for their brutality: Jaysh al-Islam, the Sultan Murad Brigade, and the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. As Brett McGurk said when he resigned from the Trump administration, "...Many of the Syrian opposition groups backed by Turkey include extremists who have openly declared their intent to fight the Kurds, not the Islamic State."

The PKK is not a terrorist organization. The PKK was founded in 1984 as a national liberation organization seeking independence from Turkey. In 1995, they changed their approach, gave up armed struggle except in self-defense, and signed the Geneva Convention. Their current strategy is to organize for direct democracy in Kurdish areas and try to reform Turkey into a democratic state that will grant them autonomy and civil rights. Belgian courts have ruled repeatedly that the PKK is not a terrorist organization; they consider the war with Turkey an armed civil conflict. In 2020, the European Court of Justice likewise ruled that the PKK should be removed from the terrorist list. The PKK has been trying to hold peace negotiations with the Turkish government for many years. Rather than give cover to Erdogan's efforts to stay in power by attacking the Kurdish movement, the U.S. should support such peace negotiations and consider removing the PKK from the U.S. terrorist list.

As founding members of the Emergency Committee for Rojava, we are deeply concerned with creating stability in Northeast Syria and ensuring that the enormous gains in human rights, and especially in women's rights, in these areas are maintained. We believe the best prospect for a safe and stable Rojava will occur within the broader context of a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue in Turkey. We urge you to revoke the renewal of the bounties on the heads of the three leaders of the PKK and to pressure Turkey to enter peace negotiations. We hope to discuss this with the appropriate State Department representative soon.

On behalf of the Emergency Committee for Rojava,

Meredith Tax, President
Debbie Bookchin, Secretary
Ozlem Goner, Executive Director

cc: Brett McGurk, U.S. National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa