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Greece-Turkey

Aegean Sea: urgent anti-war mobilization needed

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There has been sabre rattling since June in the eastern part of the Aegean Sea, in an area encompassing the Mediterranean coasts of Turkey and the nearest Greek islands, as well as the island of Cyprus. The most obvious cause is of course the expansionist ambitions of Erdogan, on which we will not dwell here: in difficulty in his country, reigning only through mass repression and imprisonment, the Turkish leader tries to find a way out by mixing fundamentalist and nationalist discourses, against a backdrop of military deployment against his people and against neighbouring peoples.

This is known and indisputable - the Turkish and Kurdish refugees in Greece are there to bear witness to it - but is not enough to explain everything about the current situation: basically, we can say that the current problem arises from the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) and other treaties concluded thereafter, restricting the possibilities of the former Ottoman Empire acting as it pleases on the Aegean Sea, even very close to its coast. In 1995, threats of war had been made by Turkey in the face of Greece's desire to extend the limit of its territorial waters, and in 1996 there was the episode of the uninhabited islet of Imia, near Kalymnos, during which nationalist and militarist outbidding almost provoked war. There have long been Turkish claims relating to maritime traffic and sovereignty over a large part of the Eastern Aegean.

What makes the current situation explosive are 3 elements:

- ▶ social misery, particularly in Turkey, but obviously very strong also in Greece with an ultra-neoliberal government cynically arguing that if so many young people are unemployed, it is because they have not been trained how to write a CV! The exploitation of a circumstantial patriotism, relayed by the mainstream private media with financial assistance from the Mitsotakis government, could constitute a good diversion, in the dreams of the leaders of the Greek right. In Turkey, Defence Minister Akar evokes the "Blue Homeland", a concept of the nationalist far-right for maritime "reconquest" to the west of Turkey.
- ▶ the presence of hydrocarbons in the disputed areas: interests are very keen on both sides, knowing that on the Greek side, the government already wants to have these deposits exploited by the oil giants Exxon Mobil, Eni and Total.
- ▶ the role of the military in the policies of the two governments and the interests of arms dealers. Both NATO members, the two countries devote insane amounts to arms spending: Turkey in 2019 spent 20.4 billion, or 2.7% of its GDP, up 86% since 2010; and Greece, where the memorandums plunged a large part of the population into poverty, is one of the top 3 NATO countries in 2019 in terms of the share of military spending in GDP. And while the staff of Greek hospitals are fighting every day against the poverty of their institutions, tirelessly demanding job creation, while with a worrying rise in Covid contamination, teachers demand a maximum of 15 students in their classes, Mitsotakis is seriously considering budgeting for 10 billion euros in military spending ...

Border demarcations to better pollute?

It has been stressed: the question of maritime limits is an old question, not to be overlooked. However, it is obvious that Athens tends to consider the whole Aegean Sea as a "Greek lake", and the government refuses to consider anything which is presented as an attack on national sovereignty and on international law, even if within the big imperialist institutions, the tendency is to wish for relaxation and the opening of dialogue between the two governments. Several sensitive questions arise: the limits of territorial waters, which Greece would like to extend from 6 to 12 nautical miles, which in the Aegean would be seen as a *casus belli* by Erdogan; the limits of the

submarine continental shelf, which in practice can go up to 550 km from the coast (we can understand the futility of discussions on this point about Greek islands 2 km from the Turkish coast!); and more strongly since the fairly recent definition of the concept of exclusive economic zone (EEZ), an area where a country gives itself the right to preserve balances but above all to exploit (fishing, fuel and so on). These notions of maritime law overlap in the Aegean case with other considerations such as those of the "closed sea" which make delimitations even more difficult. Suddenly, Erdogan wanted to illustrate his discourse on "reconquest" last winter by passing or rather by imposing an agreement on the Libyan government on the delimitation of an EEZ between the two countries, blithely encroaching on what Greece defines as its responsibility, and then imposed a de facto recognition by sending a seabed exploration vessel flanked by military ships. To better reject the *fait accompli*, in June the Greek government signed an agreement with Italy defining an EEZ in the Ionian Sea (suddenly, Erdogan wants to "protect" Albania!). Then in August an EEZ was agreed with Egypt, this last zone overlapping that established by Turkey.

In the present situation, what is at stake beyond the strategic aspects is obviously not the concern to preserve natural spaces: on the contrary, all these manoeuvres have only one goal, the maximum exploitation of the seabed for the greater profit of the oil companies. However, the Mediterranean has for a long time already been a sea threatened by very high pollution: in addition to denouncing the inter-bourgeois race for profit, what is imperative is therefore also to reject any new source of pollution in the Mediterranean. This is all the more fundamental when we see the contempt of the Mitsotakis government for the defence of the environment in order to better serve its polluting friends of all kinds.

Nationalist poison in Greece

Last winter, Erdogan's sordid operation bringing thousands of refugees to the Greek borders (Evros river, north-eastern islands) to push a certain number to cross into Greece, created a climate of hysterical nationalism on the Greek right and far right, which spoke of an "invasion" of the territory and set up, alongside soldiers deployed in large numbers, para-military groups openly infiltrated by the Nazi criminals of Golden Dawn and other European fascists. The mainstream media then hinted at a bellicose discourse on territorial integrity that anti-racist mobilisations were struggling to fight against. Today, this nationalist discourse is starting again, in defence of "maritime borders", but also in the face of the invoked danger of invasions of small islands close to Turkey, and Greek nationalists can obviously thank Erdogan: recently, the caudillo of Ankara threatened to invade the small island of Kastellorizo, accusing the Greek army of accumulating forces there. In this situation, it goes without saying that we must firmly denounce the bellicose intentions of Erdogan, but more generally challenge the nationalism and militarism shared by the two regimes.

Without forgetting another very concrete aspect: the patriotic discourse totally ignores the concrete reality of these small islands! Thus, concerning Kastellorizo, a deputy from Syriza, Papachristopoulos, recalled in a recent forum that there is no pharmacy there, that the health centre is under-staffed, that the 50 young people in school are deprived of half the teachers needed, and that relations with their close neighbours in the Turkish town of Kas are and continue to be very good... Money for social needs and friendship between peoples, not for weapons of war!

The dangerous game of the imperialist "allies"

Faced with a situation that could quickly degenerate into open conflict, everyone acts according to their economic and/or strategic concerns. Thus, Stoltenberg, the secretary of NATO of which the two countries are members, is accused by Athenian officials of allowing the situation to deteriorate so as not to annoy Turkey, an important relay of the United States in the region. The USA are also procrastinating with regard to Turkey: they would not like to see

their Turkish customer increasing the number of arms it orders from Russia. On the EU side, the Greek insistence on economic measures against Turkey has failed to convince for the time being the German presidency: it seems that Merkel's first concern is not to push Erdogan to use the refugees again to put pressure on the EU. The only common wish is the "opening of dialogue" between the two countries. This diplomatic position in fact conceals a basic tendency to liberal "laissez faire": the impression given is that the envisaged prospect would be to let the situation deteriorate until a military incident from which the various authorities would push for negotiations. In any case, whether the imperialists believe in an illusory way that they can control the situation or this is only a pretext, the threat is really there, as pointed out by *PRIN*, the journal of the NAR (New Left Current): in the current period of crisis, competition between the bourgeoisies can find an outlet in war, and it is out of the question to underestimate the threat of a regional war .

And this militarist slant is strongly illustrated by the position of the French government: Macron rushed to send military boats, planes and the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier to the area. Competing in brash statements with Erdogan, he seeks to build support among the traditionally Hellenophile French public, and of course immediately obtained the support of bellicose ultra-neoliberal Daniel Cohn-Bendit in a column entitled "We are all Greek Europeans" (*Liberation*, 17 August, 2020). He speaks of the success of "structural reforms as deep as they are violent" to designate the ruins left by the troika in Greece, and also pays homage to the French president: "By sending military reinforcements to the Aegean Sea, Emmanuel Macron saved the honour of Europe". It is therefore urgent to recall the obvious: Macron acts above all as a sales representative for Total in the Mediterranean, and the sending of planes and warships is, beyond strategic aims, a commercial demonstration, to encourage the Greek state's purchase of frigates, Rafale and the modernization of Mirage and Exocet and Scalp missiles!

There is therefore nothing to expect from "international diplomacy", and on the contrary we have to be very concerned about the headlong rush, which cannot be contained for long: thus, Erdogan was apparently pressing for a Greek ship to be sunk, which his military hierarchy refused, while on the Greek side, a national military committee evokes the sending of hundreds of mobilization sheets to reservists.

An urgent and essential mobilization

Faced with this situation, we could expect at least an anti-war campaign from the Greek left: it is quite the opposite among the reformists! Indeed, Syriza, walking in the nationalist footsteps of Pasok, criticized the EEZ agreement with Egypt because it takes away a little of Greece's maritime sovereignty, while Tsipras for his part boasts of having made Erdogan back down a few years by brandishing the military threat! Only a few voices criticize this orientation, criticizing the EEZ agreement with Egypt as a provocation preventing the opening of talks with Turkey. On the side of the KKE (the Greek Communist Party), there is denunciation of the imperialist game aimed at removing Greece's sovereignty! In this case, the Greek reformist left is therefore more nationalist than Prime Minister Mitsotakis, whose strategy is particularly lacking in clarity: in spite of posing as "head of the nation", with the probable objective of negotiations (at the International Court of Justice in The Hague), he rejects for now the bellicose discourse, while leaving his far right (Samaras and fascist defectors) and a good part of the media to propagate it.

Fortunately, in this tense situation, the tendency for a good part of the Greek anti-capitalist left (organizations like NAR, SEK and Synantisi) is to mobilize on a triple axis:

- ▶ against nationalism, for international solidarity and the fight for the defence of social gains. It is therefore decisive that the international fight also includes a battle in each country against local capitalists: there is no question of going to be killed for the interests of the Greek or Turkish bourgeoisie.
- ▶ against militarism and militarization, for peace between peoples.
- ▶ against maritime drilling and for the protection of the environment in the Aegean Sea.

Aegean Sea: urgent anti-war mobilization needed

If these axes are put forward with some nuances by all, we are already seeing some concrete results: thus a joint appeal by NAR and the Turkish Labour Party, other Greek-Turkish contacts being in progress. And also acts of significant symbolic importance, such as the inhabitants of Datsa, a small Turkish town opposite the Greek island of Halki, unfurling a huge banner "peace will win" in both languages on the port. The objective now should be to try to regroup forces for a broad unitary movement to develop in Greece, Turkey but also all over Europe, for a Europe and an Aegean without borders!

Athens, 6 September 2020

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