

# Bitter winds and green shoots – a review of 2021

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## **PART I**

Makhmour refugee camp is, in many ways, a microcosm of the Kurdish struggle. It epitomises both the forces lined up against it, and the determination of Kurdish resistance; so it seems fitting to begin this review of a year of Kurdish struggle with a quick resumé of recent events at the camp. The Makhmour families, now numbering some 12,000 people, escaped Turkey's anti-Kurdish repression in the 1990s. They have been in Makhmour in

Iraq since 1998, and run their camp community according to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. In 2014, camp residents played an important part in the fight against ISIS, and Masoud Barzani, then President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, came to the camp to thank them and the PKK personally for the part they had played. However, this UN-recognised refugee camp has now been blockaded for over two years by Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as a collective punishment for the assassination of a Turkish diplomat whose killer has never been identified. The camp is also a frequent target of Turkish air attacks; and this week it was in the sights of the Iraqi government, who attempted to fence it round with barbed wire. But the people of the camp rose up in protest and told Iraq to back off – and Iraq backed off. The camp's protest was supported on social media, where the United Nations was upbraided for doing nothing to help. They responded by banning the refugee camp from their twitter account.

## **IN TURKEY**

2021 has seen the Turkish government batten down the hatches, but has also demonstrated their vulnerability, and allowed people to visualise a future beyond President Erdoğan.

Repression of political dissent, and especially of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), has only increased. Immunity from imprisonment has been lifted from more members of parliament, and every week has seen more detentions of politician and activists. Erdoğan refuses to distinguish HDP politicians from PKK guerrillas, and all are swept up by Turkey's catch-all anti-terrorism laws.

April saw the opening of the Kobanê Case, where 108 people, including leading members of the HDP, face potential life imprisonment for calling protests in support of Kobanê when it was under siege from ISIS in 2014. The prosecution's legal arguments have been annihilated by the European Court of Human Rights, but Turkey's courts have largely become tools of the government rather than arbiters of law. The proceedings have been suffused in irregularities from the start, and after a change of judge and the court's

refusal to slow the unfeasibly rapid programme, the defence lawyers are refusing to participate and give the proceedings legitimacy.

While the Kobanê case is intended to hobble the HDP and prevent it from functioning, Erdoğan's far-right coalition partner, Devlet Bahçeli, has been pushing for the party to be banned altogether. A case for the closure of the HDP was filed in March, but was so badly put together it was not accepted until June, after a rewrite. It also calls for 451 named HDP members to be banned from party politics for five years.

Anti-HDP rhetoric has encouraged several attacks on HDP offices. In June, an attacker entered the Izmir office and murdered a young woman volunteer, Deniz Poyraz. If a planned meeting had not been postponed, this could have been a massacre. The trial of Poyraz's killer, who was caught leaving the building, began this week, amid serious criticism that there has been no attempt made to carry out a proper investigation or to look into his links with organisations that might have planned the attack. The friendliness shown towards him by the police on the day of the murder seems to have been repeated in court.

The day before the case opened, another attacker entered an HDP office in Istanbul, pretending to be interested in membership. He threw the offered cup of tea at his hosts before attacking with a gun and knife, but this time no one was seriously hurt.

Although Abdullah Öcalan's ideas and image are ever present, Öcalan himself has been allowed almost no access to the outside world. In March, rumours that he could be dead produced widespread protests and the concession of a phone call with his brother, which was cut off after less than five minutes. There has been no contact since. Öcalan's isolation – his isolation in the prison and his isolation from his family and lawyers – contravenes international rules on human rights, and there was much anger and disappointment that the delegation from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) didn't visit Öcalan in prison when they went to Turkey in January.

A rotating hunger strike, involving hundreds of political prisoners and calling for an end to Öcalan's isolation and also for the end of prisoner abuse more generally, had to be called off in September after 289 days when it was clear that Turkey's controlled media was not able to raise the public interest necessary for it to have affect.

Reports from Turkey's political prisons have been increasingly worrying. Prisoners have been subjected to extensive and sadistic abuse, including not being released after they have served their sentence, and there is no clemency for prisoners who are seriously ill. Covid has been used as an excuse for greater isolation.

A prisoner in Ankara told his sister that "the guards told him that he had no legal rights because there is no justice or a constitution". They said, "we are the boss here. This is a house of torture".

On 9 December, Kandıra Prison announced the death of Gariba Gezer, a young woman who had made public her abuse by the prison authorities. Although her death is said to be being investigated, one of her fellow prisoners is now on hunger strike protesting the authorities' refusal to allow her to give a witness statement.

Bianet reports that a record number of new prisons are being built, and that many of these are being constructed by prison labour.

July and August saw a succession of violent anti-Kurdish mob attacks, including an attack in Konya where seven members of a family were murdered. The attacks were encouraged by government rhetoric, and the perpetrators were protected by the authorities.

At the same time, wildfires were being blamed on the PKK and HDP, and vigilantes were attacking Kurds, accusing them of arson. Pro-government media fanned the rumours, hoping to detract from criticism that Erdoğan had spent money on presidential aircraft while allowing firefighting planes to rot in their hangars.

All the while, in parts of South East Turkey, the war against the PKK rumbled on. Turkish military action included the deliberate burning and felling of forests, and mass punishment of local villages.

Turkey began the year with economic difficulties, and these have only got worse. Erdoğan's insistence on reducing interest rates has caused the Turkish Lira to collapse in value, and, with heavy dependence on imports, that translates into big price rises. An estimated 60% inflation rate left families struggling to survive, and queuing for subsidised bread, while businesses were folding. In the week before Christmas, the Central Bank sold billions of dollars in foreign reserves to produce a dramatic upswing, but this is likely to be only a temporary reprieve.

This year has seen major protests, though nothing has yet matched the momentum of the Gezi Park protests of 2013. Students have been protesting since January, when Erdoğan imposed his choice of rector to lead Istanbul's prestigious Boğaziçi University, and brutal crackdowns on the student protests served to widen support. The women's day march demonstrated the unity of the oppressed, and there were big protests against Turkey's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, which was announced by Erdoğan in March and has prompted an increase in misogyny and in attacks on the LGBTI community. There were large turnouts for Newroz, which has become a symbol of Kurdish resistance; and, although every protest is met with bans and detentions, crowds came into the streets to protest the murder of Deniz Poyraz, and to express their anger at the government's failure to manage the economy. The HDP's recent Istanbul Congress can be seen as a rally of resistance.

All polls show the government losing support, and, in a fair fight, there seems little chance of Erdoğan winning the elections that must take place by June 2023. Looking to the possibility of a future beyond Erdoğan, not only raises questions over how he might attempt to cling onto power, but also the nature of the forces that might take his place.

Opposition parties are unanimous in calling for an end to presidential dictatorship and a return to parliamentary democracy. And the main

opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) has begun to encourage thoughts of a real change of outlook. Of course, we can't forget their ethnic nationalist roots and their alliance with the far-right – and increasingly popular – Good Party. Nor can we ignore their current anti-refugee rhetoric (and even the rules brought it by the unashamedly xenophobic CHP mayor of Bolu). But there have now been several examples of attempts to build bridges and to begin to acknowledge past wrongs, and the HDP has been quick to take these up in a positive spirit that can help give them a momentum of their own.

## **THE KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ**

Kurdish issues tend to fall way down the international news agenda, and the greatest threats – and most stubborn resistance – have been the least talked about. 2021 saw Turkey's cross-border attacks into the northern mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq grow into a brutal war that most of the world has chosen to ignore.

This is the part of Iraq in which the PKK have their bases, but Turkey's attacks are aimed at more than the PKK. Erdoğan has not hidden his plans for Turkish expansion. Turkey has had a permanent military presence in the region since 1997, and now they are building more military bases and constructing roads deep into the Iraqi interior. As in their occupations in Syria, they have deliberately destroyed the natural environment and driven away the local population.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has allied with Turkey to boost their own position. In doing so, they have become complicit in undermining the autonomy they spent decades fighting for. While other parties and individuals have warned that intra-Kurdish fighting will only benefit Turkey, the KDP has used their peshmerga to assist Turkey, hemming in the PKK, supplying the invading forces with vital information, and even taken part in direct confrontation.

Turkey's first major attack this year was in Gare in February, where it seems that they hoped to kill PKK leaders but ended up killing Turkish hostages. The current attacks in the Metina, Zap and Avashin-Basyan regions began on 23

April. Again, the Turkish troops appear to have been surprised by the level of resistance they encountered, and the PKK report that Turkey has tried to undermine their resistance by using chemical gases to reach the guerrillas in their mountain tunnels. Although this is illegal, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons has resisted all calls to investigate.

Problems in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are not limited to cross border attacks by external forces. The number of would-be emigrants is evidence of the destruction of hope resulting from endemic corruption and increasing authoritarianism. While the authorities have not resorted to lethal violence, as they did against protests last December, activists and journalists face long detentions, and there are reports of torture and of convictions based on false confessions. Recent student protests were met with tear gas, rubber bullets, and water cannon.

The KDP's main rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), has been riven by a leadership struggle between two cousins, which has weakened it and, it is claimed, brought it closer in outlook to the KDP.

This Autumn, the President of Belarus attempted to put pressure on the European Union by encouraging migrants to cross the border into Poland. The majority of the migrants he brought to Belarus for this purpose were Iraqi Kurds. Poland was quick to fortify the border and push back would-be immigrants, and several lost their lives in the damp cold of the border forests. Many have now been sent back to Iraq, often against their will.

More migrants from Kurdistan have been drowned attempting to cross the British Channel to reach the UK, and the Mediterranean to get to Greece.

Meanwhile ISIS attacks have become a growing problem. Sleeper cells have put down roots in the security cracks that have emerged where control is disputed between the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, and there have been accusations that resources intended for the fight against ISIS have been diverted to attack the PKK.

Despite all this, the business-friendly Kurdistan Regional Government continues to be supported by Western governments.

## **ŞENGAL**

It is now over a year since the Autonomous Council of Şengal (Sinjar) made clear that they were not going to comply with an 'agreement' on their future that had been made without consulting them, and were not going to hand over control of the Yazidi homeland to the Iraqi army and KDP peshmerga that had failed to protect them from ISIS in 2014. Deadlines for their internal security forces to stand down have come and gone, and they are still there.

As independent Kurds, following Ocalan's philosophy, the Yazidis have found themselves in Turkey's firing line – though they have never posed any threat to Turkey. In August Turkish drones killed a Yazidi leader and destroyed a Yazidi hospital. Another Yazidi leader was killed in a targeted attack in December.