

An end of year review: A world realigned – Part 2

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Bakur/southeast Turkey

This year will see the centenary, in July, of the Treaty of Lausanne, by which world powers suffocated hopes of an independent Kurdistan, dividing Kurdish land and people between different nation states and ensuring a hundred years of persecution. This was also the treaty that established the Republic of Turkey from the remnants of the defeated Ottoman Empire, so it will be Turkey’s centenary too; and President Erdoğan plans to celebrate it by reviving Ottoman power, with himself at the helm. But before this important date – by 18 June at the latest – Turkey is required to hold presidential and general [elections](#). With so much at stake, and with polling figures still

predicting an opposition win, Turkish politics is becoming ever more authoritarian and brutal, and we can expect it only to get worse.

Every week there are round-ups and detentions of people that the government wishes to see out of the way: politicians, activists (especially women), journalists, human rights defenders, or simply people that have said or tweeted a criticism that the government would rather not hear. Often, they are detained under Turkey's endlessly elastic terrorism laws, especially if they have any connections to anything Kurdish, and the arrest is done in a way intended to cause humiliation and pain. Detainees are subjected to early morning raids on their homes and physically assaulted. Their hands are cuffed behind their backs, and they are forced to bow their heads. When they get to the police station, they may be strip-searched.

Protests and demonstrations are banned, blockaded, and battered. Photographs of members of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) trying to give a press statement while hemmed in by multiple layers of riot police have become normal. Police attacked an HDP MP so viciously at a demonstration that he had to be [hospitalised](#) with multiple fractures to his leg and a bloodied face. When, after seeing a video of dying PKK guerrillas, the head of the Turkish Medical Association called for an independent investigation into accusations of the use of chemical weapons by the Turkish army, she was arrested. She is currently being tried for "making propaganda for a terrorist organisation". This week saw the arrest of the Co-Chair of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP), the biggest constituent party of the HDP.

HDP members have been under attack from Turkey's increasingly politicised judiciary for years now, with thousands arrested, including MPs, Mayors (who have almost all been replaced by unelected trustees), and the Party's former co-chairs. Two big, related cases against the party have been making their way through the court system. One could see 108 people, including leading party members, [imprisoned](#) for life without parole. The other could see the HDP banned completely, and up to 451 people banned from party politics for five years. Next week, a court will decide whether to stop the party's government funding. Evidence against the party is based on anonymous witnesses and is full of contradictions, but, as everyone knows, court

decisions will reflect the wishes and political calculations of the government. Meanwhile, another HDP MP has been stripped of her parliamentary immunity and arrested.

Other politicians have been wary of showing support for the HDP, but an emboldened government has extended its attacks to the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). While the attacks on the CHP are of a much smaller scale, they can still create an electoral stumbling block. In December, Ekrem İmamoğlu, the CHP Mayor of Istanbul, who is regarded as a possible contender for the presidency, was [sentenced](#) to 2 years, 7 ½ months for "insulting a public official". If his appeal is rejected, he will be removed from his post and banned from politics. Also banned from seeking political office, is the CHP's İstanbul Provincial Chair, who is regarded as the architect of İmamoğlu's mayoral election victory and is serving a suspended sentence for old social media posts.

New laws have made it easier for the government to clamp down on freedom of speech – especially the law passed in October that has been dubbed the "[Censorship Law](#)". This has brought in prison sentences of one to three years for "disseminating misleading information".

When it comes to political prisoners, incarceration is not deemed punishment enough, and the authorities seem to take a sadistic pleasure in making prisoners lives as miserable as possible, including through depriving them of human company. The worsening conditions and the impossibility of receiving a fair trial have made many prisoners resort to hunger strikes. Prisoners' relatives protest weekly, and are always met with police violence.

Meanwhile, whole areas of Bakur/southeast Turkey continue to be treated like battle zones, with villages and pastures shut off for days at a time, and acres of forest destroyed in the name of security. And Erdoğan rallies his supporters through bellicose threats against neighbouring countries that are only outdone by the hyperbole of his Interior Minister.

Hopes for something better must be tempered by a realistic look at the CHP-dominated opposition alliance, which lacks much vision beyond getting rid of

Erdoğan. The large presence of the right-wing nationalist İYİ Party prevents them from working with the HDP or making moves towards resolving Kurdish issues. Images of İmamoğlu embracing İYİ Party leader, Meral Akşener, at the rally following his court case sent a warning message to anyone tempted towards optimism. When Erdoğan launched his latest attacks against the PKK in Iraq in April, CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who, just the previous month, had told a meeting in Diyarbakir that the CHP would solve the Kurdish Problem, tweeted his support for Turkey's "heroic army". When a bomb exploded in an Istanbul street and, despite evidence or logic, the government attributed it to the "PKK/YPG" and used this as an excuse to bomb North and East Syria, the CHP stayed silent.

Throughout the year, the Turkish authorities have continued to reject or ignore all requests to visit Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in his island prison. A delegation from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture finally visited the island in September, but doubts have now been cast on whether Öcalan actually met with them, and they refuse to either confirm or deny this. If they did not see him, it is a year and nine months since he had any contact with the outside world. To try and break the deadlock and raise awareness of what is happening, hundreds of lawyers from Turkey and across the world have applied to visit him.

Every restriction by the Turkish government has been met with resistance. Attacks have been met with protests even though the protestors knew that they too would be attacked. The strength of that resistance was demonstrated by the HDP Congress in July, which was attended by tens of thousands, and by the Newroz celebrations organised by the HDP, which brought together millions, despite police checkpoints and searches.

Başur/the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

In the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey has been building an extensive network of military bases. They claim to be fighting PKK "terrorists", but this is an invasion and occupation. Furthermore, it is an invasion that is being aided and abetted by the party that dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. The Barzani family, which runs the Kurdistan Democratic Party

(KDP) like a feudal clan, have allowed it to become completely subservient to Turkish interests. In return, Turkey ensures the growth of their personal wealth. The PKK has had bases in the northern mountains since the 1980s, when the KDP also considered themselves as freedom fighters. And in 2013, when the PKK were in peace talks with the Turkish Government, the Kurdistan Regional Government made an agreement with Turkey to allow the PKK to withdraw across the border into the region. In 2014, the PKK played a vital role in defeating ISIS, and the KDP welcomed them as brothers. But, today, the KDP are happy to help Turkey see off their political rivals, while generally taking care to avoid direct conflict.

The weather in the mountains ensures that Turkey's main military offensives are seasonal, starting in the spring. This year's attacks have reached an even greater intensity than last. The PKK reports that Turkey has repeatedly employed powerful bombs and chemical weapons in their attempts to penetrate the guerrillas' tunnels. And, although they also tell us that over 90 guerrillas have died from chemical poisoning, Turkey has been unable to break their resistance. There is no independent reporting, but Turkey has not been able to announce the victory that they seek. The PKK claim that Turkey hides the extent of their casualties and often doesn't retrieve their soldiers' bodies.

Attempts to get the "international community" to take seriously the accounts of Turkey's use of banned chemical weapons have repeatedly met a brick wall. No-one will be convinced without independent proof, and the organisations that can get that proof – the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, and the United Nations – will only act if requested to do so by a state. No state wants to stick their neck out and challenge Turkey. They prefer to use the lack of independent evidence as an excuse to do nothing. As well as the [distressing](#) video seen by the director of the Turkish Medical Association, there is a report by Peace in Kurdistan that includes interviews with local people who describe being made ill by Turkish bombing, and a report by International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, which argues that there is a case to answer, but which was restricted in what it could achieve as the KDP denied their delegation access to the localities visited for the earlier report.

As in Syria, Turkey has been accused of deliberately targeting civilian areas to try and force the local population to leave. In May, a Turkish airstrike killed two children in a Duhok village. When a television channel linked to the Kurdish Regional Government tried to report this as an attack by the PKK, a witness corrected the reporter live on air. In July, Turkish airstrikes hit families holidaying at a popular picnic spot. Nine people died, including a baby and two other children. There was anger across Iraq, reflecting the scale of the attack, and also, perhaps, the fact that the victims were not Kurds, but Arabs. Iraq declared a national day of mourning, an emergency debate was held at the United Nations – and then everyone not directly affected got on with their lives as if nothing had happened.

Turkey has also carried out air attacks on the two places in Iraq that attempt to organise society according to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan: Maxmur refugee camp, which houses families that came from Turkey as refugees in the 1990s, and Şengal (or Sinjar) the ancestral home of the Yazidis. These attacks are intended to prevent the targeted communities from enjoying the security needed to fully develop their societies, and, in the case of the Yazidi genocide survivors, the security that would allow other Yazidis still living in IDP camps the confidence to return home.

In 2014, when ISIS was approaching Şengal, the Yazidi community was abandoned without protection by both the Iraqi army and the KDP's Peşmerga. Thousands of Yazidis were killed or kidnapped, but tens of thousands managed to take refuge in the mountains, from where they were brought to safety by the PKK and YPG. Later, their rescuers helped them retake their homeland and establish their own autonomous administration and self-defence forces. Although the Iraqi constitution allows for regional autonomy, an agreement was made over the heads of the Yazidis (and probably at the instigation of the United States and Turkey) to give control of the Yazidi homeland to the Iraqi Government and the Kurdish Regional Government, the authorities that had left them to their fate. The Yazidis are not prepared to give up their autonomy and there have been various standoffs between them and the KDP and the Iraqi government. Last year, most of the pressure came from the Iraqi Government, but Turkey and the KDP were said to be pushing them. A concrete wall was built separating the people of Şengal

from their comrades in Rojava, and in April and May, Iraq attacked Yazidi check points with armoured vehicles and helicopters. There were deaths on both sides before they reached an uneasy ceasefire.

Other attacks have been attributed to Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation, which is believed to have been behind the separate assassinations of four Kurds living in Sulaymaniyah. After the killing of the feminist writer and organiser, Nagihan Akarsel, the Turkish Ambassador as good as admitted responsibility, commenting, "Those who are affiliated with the PKK are indeed our targets". In Turkey's eyes, any Kurd who follows Öcalan's idea is PKK.

While the most brutal violence has come to the Kurdistan Region from outside, all is far from well in its own governance. Endemic corruption ensures that its wealth benefits a small elite, which tries to maintain control through growing censorship and the suppression of dissent. Some of the best known and worst treated dissenting voices are the prisoners from Badinan, many of whom have been on hunger strike to protest against torture and the miscarriage of justice.

Rojhelat/Iran

For most of the world, the news from Iran is a more familiar story, though many will not be aware how much it is a Kurdish one. Kurds are one of the most oppressed groups in Iran, persecuted for their ethnicity (not Persian), their religion (generally not Shia), and their historical resistance to the imposition of the Islamic Republic. The Kurdish regions have been kept underdeveloped and highly securitised. But the Kurds are also one of the most politically mobilised groups in a country where political activity can cost you your freedom and even your life.

When Jina Amina was pulled off the street for the improper arrangement of her hijab, her Kurdish identity may have contributed to the fatal severity of her treatment. The protests triggered by her death, on 13 September, spread outwards from the Kurdish provinces. Outrage was given form through strong community structures which have only been strengthened by the brutal

reactions of the Iranian state. Established Kurdish political parties were ready to put out the call for strikes across the region, and Kurds shared, not just an instinctive longing for freedom, but a vision of regional autonomy that would finally allow them to express their Kurdishness.

The Iranian regime recognised the power of the Kurdish uprising, and met it with even more violence than they employed in other cities. The other place that stands out for the brutality of the government response is Baluchistan, which is also non-Persian and Sunni with a history of ethnic-based struggle, and Kurds and Baluchis have responded to their shared oppression with mutual solidarity.

At the same time, the Kurds are aware that what happens in the Kurdish provinces is part of a countrywide struggle.

Iran has also carried out lethal [cross-border attacks](#) against the Kurdish political parties in their exiled bases in Iraq, although those parties have chosen not to give the regime an excuse for even more violent action by using force at this stage.

Not that the regime has needed an excuse to unleash its cruel violence. While cold deliberate death sentences produce a uniquely horrific resonance, many more people have faced, often fatal, torture, or died of painful wounds that it was too risky to get treated, besides the many shot dead in the street. Confirmed figures are probably woeful underestimates, and huge numbers have disappeared unaccounted for.

Despite all the regime has done, this revolution – any other word is too weak – has only become more entrenched, with every funeral and forty-day death anniversary providing the basis for further action.

Of course, it is worrying that in most of Iran, leadership and political programme is still unclear. It is worrying that Iranian workers have not yet made a large-scale commitment to the revolution. And, as in any revolution, we know that outside forces will try and influence the direction taken, though this is emphatically not a US-inspired “colour revolution”. We know that many

of those repeating the Kurdish Women's Movement slogan of Jin Jiyan Azadi are not aware of its full revolutionary potential. But we also know that revolutionary action has the power to change our understanding of the world.

Kurds in the World

As someone who writes every week about Kurdish news, I am very conscious of how little of all this is registered by a wider world – even those things that can have widespread consequences, such as the risks of a resurgent ISIS. Occasionally, issues are debated at international bodies, but this rarely results in action. Even now that the decision has been made that Turkey's non-compliance with European Court of Human Rights Judgements cannot be ignored, systems move at glacial pace. But sometimes, for better or worse, events propel Kurds into the headlights. Here, in France, this is one of those times. The [triple murder](#) in the Kurdish cultural centre in Paris on 23 December has left Kurds everywhere in shock and in anger. Many questions have been raised about what actually took place, and the readiness with which the authorities dismissed the possibility that this was a planned and targeted attack, and not just the act of a lone racist. We can be sure that the Kurdish community will not be silent unless and until this murder, and the triple murder in Paris ten years ago, are fully and transparently investigated. But this murder has also thrown into focus many other questions – questions about European relationships with the Kurds and about European society itself. In the responses to the murders from left politicians and from trade unions, and even in the interest shown in the mainstream media, we can find a source of hope in this time of darkness.

[In [part one of her year in review](#), Sarah Glynn looks at Turkey's role in the Russia/Ukraine war, the Iranian protests, Rojava and more.]

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