

More attacks, more resistance – a weekly news review

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Across the world, history has speeded up, but perhaps nowhere more so than in the four parts of Kurdistan, where Kurds are buffeted by global and regional power struggles. The Kurdish Freedom Movement has won the attention of people everywhere for its stand against the dark destruction of ISIS, and also for the hope that it offers a better way of living. But the movement's hope, and those who try to make that hope a reality, are being attacked with a violence that is aimed at crushing all dreams of transformation. And the same reactionary forces attempt to suffocate every attempt at progressive change. This last week has seen acts by the authoritarian regimes in Iran and Turkey

that demonstrate unimaginable levels of sadistic cruelty, though we should not forget that the realpolitik of the imperial powers, with their arms deals and politically driven terrorist lists, can be even more destructive.

Iran

On Thursday morning, Iran executed a 23-year-old anti-government protestor, Mohsen Shekari, who was convicted of “enmity against God” after a closed-door trial and a confession forced under torture. It is said that his family had been told to keep quiet and wait for an appeal. Afterwards, the authorities continued to demonstrate their sadistic power by delaying handing over the body. Shekari’s family was told to go to different cemeteries only to find his body was not there. This execution is clearly intended as a warning, but it has been met with bigger protests.

Amnesty International has identified “at least 18 others at risk of execution in connection with the protests”. One of these is a doctor, Hamid Qarahasanlou, who is accused of the killing of a member of the state paramilitary Basij forces at a time when he was actually saving the life of a cleric. He and his wife were forced to undergo prolonged torture until she said that he might have been involved in the killing. Also on Amnesty’s list is twenty-year-old student, Ali Moazzami Goudarzi, who is expected to be executed today.

Many more people have been shot on the streets or have died from torture in the regime’s prisons; and the Kurdish regions, along with Baluchistan in the south-east, have suffered the most severe crackdown. Hengaw Organization for Human Rights, which reports on the Kurdish regions, continues to post pictures of people who have been abducted to an unknown fate. On Wednesday, they reported that “During the 80 days of protests and resistance... at least 122 Kurdish citizens were killed and more than 8,000 were injured by the direct fire of the repressive forces of the Iranian government.” Of those killed, seven died as a result of torture. They also recorded that more than 6,500 people had been arrested and that “the arrested citizens are systematically subjected to physical and mental torture.” They have confirmed the identities of 1,510 of those arrested, including 138 children under the age of 18.

Torture in Iran's prisons extends beyond immediate physical violence and sexual assault to include limiting access to drinking water and toilets, and hygienic conditions that foster disease.

At the beginning of the week, Western news outlets were aflutter with the story that Iran had abolished the "morality police", whose brutal enforcement of the strict dress code for women led to the death of Jina Amini and catalysed the ongoing uprising. Hopes of genuine change were short-lived, and on Tuesday, Amnesty published a statement that began: "The Iranian authorities' vague and conflicting statements on the supposed disbanding of Iran's so-called "morality police" must not deceive the international community about the continuing violence against women and girls embedded in compulsory veiling laws and fuelled by ongoing impunity for those violently enforcing them." It may be that the authorities have recognised their inability to enforce veiling using existing methods, but there has been talk of new systems using camera surveillance and of blocking transgressors' bank accounts.

Iran's uprising has become about much more than the hijab laws, but the initial comment that the morality police had been closed down, made by Iran's Chief Prosecutor, has also been understood as an attempt to distract international sympathisers with a mirage of reform just before the planned general strike that took place from Monday to Wednesday. The importance of the strike would not have been lost on anyone familiar with recent Iranian history and of the role of such strikes in bringing down the Shah's regime. Videos from this week show rows of shuttered shops, not just in the Kurdish areas where strikes have become a familiar part of the protests, but in dozens of cities across the country. The government has responded by attempting to seal closed the businesses that took part, and to take away their licenses to trade, but it is hard to see how this will help them return the economy to normal. Komala, one of the Iranian Kurdish parties, has commented, "The successful general strike across Iran has pushed the Iran Revolution into a new phase. National solidarity increases each day despite severe repression & incessant fearmongering by the regime. Kurdistan can be summarized in 3 words nowadays – strikes, protests and funerals."

Turkey

In Turkey, too, the government's determination to extinguish hope is given full sway in the prisons. This is exemplified by the treatment of Şadiye Manap, who, just over a week ago, was detained by the Turkish police on a new charge the moment she completed a thirty-year prison sentence. Her sister and others were there to meet her, but instead she was driven away in a car with blackened windows. Two years ago, the prison authorities raided Gebze Women's Closed Prison where she was held and took away the women's personal belongings, including their writings and other creations. These were declared to be the organisational documents of a terror network. Rather than prosecute Manap at that time, the government waited until she was ready for her release, and then vanquished her hopes. Not only has she spent almost her entire adult life behind bars, but she has been deprived of all the work that she created during that period that would allow her to share those times with the outside world, and that contained her personal record of thoughts and feelings, and letters from lost friends. 28 years of writing, including stories, songs, and diaries, were taken by her captors. She wrote in a letter at that time, "In short, everything material and spiritual that I have produced for 28 years has been confiscated. My letter was confiscated because I wanted to share these with my friend. I resist with great morale because I know the pain and difficulties that my people and my fellow citizens are going through. I will resist. Because I know that resistance is life."

Central to all Turkey's prison persecution is the treatment of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan. Cruelties imposed against him have become the model for wider cruelties and a threat to all Kurds, demonstrating what government power is capable of. İmralı Island Prison, with its extreme isolation, has become a testing ground for new forms of psychological torture. Öcalan's last confirmed contact with the outside world was a brief interrupted phone call with his brother in March 2021. Now (as noted last week) questions have been raised over the visit to İmralı in September that was carried out by the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). The CPT is the one organisation that has the power to insist on a visit to the prison, and Kurdish activists had put pressure on them to go. But now there are claims

that Öcalan never met with them – claims that the CPT refuses to either confirm or deny. In fact, they refuse to give any information at all until their report is written and Turkey has had time to respond, which could take 12 to 18 months; and they will only publicise the report then if Turkey agrees that they can do so. Naturally, Kurdish fears are growing, and Öcalan's lawyers argue that, in the circumstances of his complete isolation, the CPT have a duty to share the basic details of his circumstances, as well as to push for him to be allowed his statutory right to meet his legal team. To underline these arguments, Kurds have been demonstrating in front of the Agora Building in Strasbourg, where the CPT has its offices. Groups from different parts of Europe gathered in protest for three days – from Wednesday to Friday.

One torture applied to Öcalan that has since been replicated for thousands of other political prisoners is the denial of the possibility of parole – which is regarded as denial of the right to hope. Öcalan's lawyers sued Turkey over this in the European Court of Human Rights, and in 2014, after many years, the court found in Öcalan's favour. It took the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers a further seven years to follow up on the ruling and ask Turkey what they planned to do to implement it. Turkey's response was late and gave no sign of yielding to the demands of the law. The ball is therefore back with the Committee, but the case did not appear on their agenda when they held their quarterly meeting this week.

The Committee did discuss the case of Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) who has been in prison since 2016 and whose immediate release was demanded by the European Court in December 2020, but they committed to nothing more than urging the Turkish authorities and considering the case again in March. Meanwhile, attacks against the HDP continue, with demands to lift the political immunity of MP Feleknas Uca publicised this morning.

The Council of Europe and its institutions – the CPT and the Court of Human Rights – were established to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, but when it comes to the Kurds, these institutions appear to lack both clout and will for action.

Outrage in Turkey has been focused on a court case in which a woman, now aged 24, has claimed that she was married off by her father when she was only six. Her father is the leader of an Islamic sect that teaches hundreds of children, and her husband was one of his disciples. There are suggestions that political interference prevented legal action being taken ten years ago, and the case has highlighted the growing power of Turkey's religious organisations. In a YouTube debate, Zekeriya Yapıcıoğlu, President of Turkey's Kurdish right-wing Islamist party, Hürda-Par, argued that people should be able to get married at a young age if they feel ready and their parents think it appropriate, though he insisted that this was not to be misread as defending the sexual abuse of a 6-year-old.

Returning to Turkey's relationship with Europe, Turkey continues to force concessions out of Sweden at the expense of the Kurds. Mahmut Tat, who was extradited from Sweden to Turkey on 2 December, was taken straight to prison to serve an almost seven-year sentence, but, for Turkey, the sacrifice of this man, who had already been denied Swedish residency a year ago, is only an appetiser. They have made clear that in order to relinquish their veto on Swedish membership of NATO they expect to be served up the people whose names were on their original list of demands.

Tat was extradited just ten days after he was detained, with little time to appeal. An earlier attempt to extradite another Kurd, Zinar Bozkurt, was defeated after a long campaign and a hunger strike. Sweden appears to be more sympathetic to people accused of membership of the Gülen Movement. Turkey's requests for the extradition of two men they accuse of having Gülen links have been turned down, with one reason given being that the men risk prosecution in Turkey.

Syria

In Syria, Turkey's promised ground invasion is still on hold, and their attacks on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have eased somewhat, but these have left shattered infrastructure and a worried population. This week, the district of Zarghan, in the west of Al-Hasakah

canton, has been especially badly hit, and Salih Simo, Co-chair of Zarghan district council, explains that, “The occupation’s cannons were directly targeting the citizens, to empty the district from its people and occupy it, as happened in Serêkaniyê, Girê Spî, Afrin, and other occupied areas.” Shelling from Turkey and their mercenary militias has targeted the municipal building, schools, health centres, mosques, a gas station, the local security services (Asayish), shops, and a bakery that provided bread for 20 villages. Over 400 homes in the district have been destroyed.

At the same time, President Assad’s government in Damascus is putting pressure on the Autonomous areas that are surrounded by Syrian Regime territory: the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh neighbourhoods of Aleppo, and Tel Rifaat and the surrounding region of Shehba, where many of the people displaced from Afrîn have found shelter. This is not the first time that Damascus has demonstrated its power by imposing a blockade of essential goods such as fuel, oil, flour, and medicines. On Wednesday, Rojava Information Centre reported that in the Aleppo districts “All electricity generators have stopped to save the remaining diesel for hospitals and bread production”, and that in Shehba “ambulances can’t run due to lack of fuel and hospital departments are crippled.”. They also reported that, as last spring, the Autonomous Administration was responding by restricting access to the regime held area within Qamishlo.

Last Saturday, Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Autonomous Administration’s Syrian Democratic Forces, penned an opinion piece for the Washington Post in which he called on the “international community” to “immediately take concrete steps to prevent a Turkish invasion and to promote a political solution to the Kurdish conflict based on democracy, coexistence and equal rights.” This was an article geared towards an American audience, and it appears to have struck a chord, at least as far as the Turkish attacks on Syria were concerned. However, for an insight into the complicated diplomacy that the Autonomous Administration has to negotiate, we can learn more from an interview Abdi made with Ibrahim Hamidi for Asharq Al-Awsat, which was published on Wednesday.

In response to Hamidi's question about the easing of Turkey's attacks, Abdi credited both international pressure, and the SDF's own preparedness, which had deprived Turkey of the major SDF casualties they are looking for. However, he made clear that the Americans needed to do more than talk. Abdi also spoke about the visit of the Commander of the Russian Forces, who had come to the SDF base. He told Hamidi that Russia was trying to make Turkey commit to their 2019 agreement, and commented, "We can say that Russia is now standing in a neutral position between us and Turkey."

With respect to the Syrian regime, the relationship seems more difficult. Abdi observed, "We are in agreement with the regime over main issues related to maintaining Syria's territorial integrity. Problems lie in other areas, such as administrative affairs and issues related to education... [W]e are not opposed to the SDF becoming part of the defense organization of the Syrian army. We have conditions, however... The SDF must have a role and specific distinction in the military." And Abdi expressed his concern that Damascus was trying to exploit the Turkish attacks for their own benefit, rather than standing with the SDF against Turkish occupation.

Iraq

On Monday, under the heading "An assassination, a feud and the fight for power in Iraq's Kurdistan", Reuters reported on the dangerously deteriorating relations between the two clan-based parties that dominate the politics of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. There is no space to examine these events here, but we can be sure that, as ever, ordinary folk will be the losers.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government continues its war against the PKK in the Iraqi mountains. Instead of a vote-winning victory, Turkey has had to announce the death of an army major, and they appear to be concealing the loss of their soldiers. In Turkey's ongoing budget debates, the HDP has criticised the government for pouring ever larger amounts of money into war while people are left in poverty – and they have called for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question through dialogue.

Co-ordinated protests across Europe have helped to draw attention to allegations of Turkish use of chemical weapons against the PKK in Iraq. The International Association of Democratic Lawyers has launched a petition calling for member states of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to request that the organisation carry out an independent investigation. As a result of the protests, the issue has been taken up in the French media, with a cover story in l'Humanité, which was also mentioned on France 24. Now campaigners need to work even harder to translate this interest into action.

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