

Iran's multi-ethnic revolution and a spotlight on European relations – a weekly news review

Last Tuesday, a conference room in the European Parliament in Brussels witnessed a historic coming together of the three main political parties representing the Kurds of Rojhelat, or East Kurdistan, the Kurdish region of Iran. Leaders of the three parties were there for a day's discussion on the future of Iran's "Jina Revolution", and they were joined by representatives from other non-Persian groups because this revolution is distinguished from previous revolutionary movements not only by having women and women's rights at the forefront, but also by taking its power from the periphery.

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Last Tuesday, a conference room in the European Parliament in Brussels witnessed a [historic coming together](#) of the three main political parties representing the Kurds of Rojhelat, or East Kurdistan, the Kurdish region of

Iran. These are the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), which is the leftist descendant of the party that established the short-lived Republic of Mahabad in 1946; the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), which follows the philosophy of Abdullah Öcalan; and Komala – Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist Party of Iran (which is not to be confused with breakaway organisations of the same name, including the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan led by the no-longer-leftist Abdollah Mohtadi). Leaders of the three parties were there for a day's discussion on the future of Iran's "Jina Revolution", and they were joined by representatives from other non-Persian groups, because, as the speakers emphasised, the Jina Revolution is distinguished from previous revolutionary movements not only by having women and women's rights at the forefront, but also by taking its power from the periphery. The initial momentum came from Kurdistan, and the determination to keep going is best exemplified by the weekly mass protests in Baluchi Zahedan.

As the speakers noted, Iran is a multi-ethnic country where only around half the population is classified as Persian, with Farsi as their mother tongue. (Ethnicity doesn't have hard boundaries so figures vary from source to source.) Non-Persian peoples have been oppressed under both the Shah and the Ayatollahs, and revolutionary actions have been especially harshly suppressed in the non-Persian areas. Individuals suffer multiple overlapping and linked oppressions: as ethnic minorities, as Sunnis or as non-Muslims, as women, as workers in a system where economic position is heavily influenced by those other identities.

Conference speakers advocated for the recognition of the right to self-determination, envisaged as decentralised autonomy within Iran, and Maryam Fathi, from The East Kurdistan Free Women's Society (KJAR) summarised Öcalan's ideas of Democratic Confederalism.

As can be seen on the ground, especially with the links made between Kurdistan and Baluchistan but also with links between previously antagonistic groups, and as was demonstrated in the choice of conference speakers (Kurdish, Baluch, Arab, Turk-Azari), unity in struggle of the different national peoples is seen as vital – with Rojava serving as a model. Mustafa Hijri, leader

of the KDPI, described this as a form of internationalism, while PJAK's co-chair, Siamand Moeini, described the Jina revolution as creating a renaissance in Iranian society. If the revolution is to succeed, it has to expand and overcome what writer Behruz Buçani described as the colonial mindset of Persian society and media, which wants to keep the non-Persian narrative on the margins. Komala Spokesperson, Ebrahim Alizadeh, began the afternoon session with a reminder that democracy is meaningless without social justice, and that women's rights and the right to self-determination are part of democracy.

All the Kurdish parties are armed and see their weapons as vital to their defence and survival; however, they have chosen not to intervene militarily in the ongoing revolution. This hasn't stopped their bases in Iraq from coming under attack from the Iranian military, which the KDPI leader described as the price of revolution. PJAK guerrillas are based in the border mountains, where Turkey helps Iran attack them. A PJAK guerrilla was [killed](#) by a Turkish drone last Sunday.

As in any united front, the test will be whether the different components are able to work together strategically without submerging their own essential political programmes. This first bringing together of the three Kurdish parties was a testimony both to the difficulty of creating that unity, and to the determination to make it succeed.

The MEK

I'm not sure how many MEPs attended Tuesday's conference other than those already active on Kurdish issues, but Europe's parliamentarians could be forgiven for confusion over Iran's ongoing revolution. The conference this week was organised with the support of the Left Group, the Greens/European Free Alliance, and the Social Democrats. Two weeks earlier, the European People's Party Group, which describes itself as centre right, sponsored a [separate conference on Iran](#), which featured Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the People's Mujahedin of Iran (MEK). MEK has cultivated western supporters and their lobbyists are always visible at the European institutions, but the organisation has very little support on the ground in Iran.

MEK began in the 1960s as a movement that attempted to combine Islam and Marxism, and they were very active in the 1979 revolution; but, after thousands of members were murdered by Khomeini, they took refuge in Iraq under the protection of Saddam Hussein. They fought for Saddam against Iran and against the Kurds, at the expense of their former support, and after the 2003 Iraq War the organisation was given a new lease of life by anti-Iran hawks in the United States, who protected their camp and then moved it to Albania when the Iraqi government insisted that they get out of the country. Defectors from the organisation have described a [cult-like structure](#) controlled by physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, with members forced to divorce and give up their children. Maryam Rajavi was one such divorcee, who then married the original leader, Massoud Rajavi, who has not been seen since 2003. The principal activity of the organisation is political lobbying, for which they seem extremely well funded, and social media intervention through an army of trolls. They call for regime change in Iran and portray Maryam Rajavi as the leader in waiting; and their annual “Free Iran” conferences in Paris have been attended by elected politicians from Europe and America. (A Guardian [Long Read](#), written by Arron Merat in 2018, gives the organisation’s extraordinary story.)

The subcommittee on human rights

And there are also the discussions on Iran that are held as part of the European Union’s official business, such as those organised by the subcommittee on human rights. This has tried to [discuss practical ways that the EU and member states could help the people of Iran](#), but has not engaged with the radical movements from the peripheries, and would find it hard to envisage any other sort of democracy than the liberal nation state.

The United Nations

Meanwhile, over at the United Nations, the Iranian representative has been [chosen](#) to chair the Human Rights Council Social Forum that will be held in Geneva in November. This would seem to negate any message sent by last December’s much-vaunted removal of Iran from the UN Commission on the

Status of Women, and suggests little respect for the UN's ongoing [fact-finding mission](#). For the cherry on the cake, the UN will host an [Iranian exhibition on women's fashion](#) to coincide with the June session of the Human Right's Council – featuring on its poster a colourful close-fitting dress that no Iranian woman would be allowed to wear in public.

The EU and Turkey

International organisations are being put to the test with respect to Turkey, too. Also this week, the European Parliament discussed the latest draft report on EU-Turkey relations, which had been delayed so as to include the elections. In a break from tradition, this time the document includes no mitigating nod to Turkey's "legitimate security concerns". The draft [states](#) that the parliament is "dismayed" by Turkey's continued democratic backsliding, which has made the country "a global showcase for all kinds of authoritarian practices". And it concludes that Turkey's EU accession process has lost its purpose. However, it looks for a new framework to engage with a country that the EU still considers a "key partner" and "vital ally", and it reaffirms support for an upgraded customs union.

The European Court of Human rights

At the Council of Europe, the Committee of Ministers has again looked at the cases of the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), [Selahattin Demirtaş](#), and of businessman philanthropist, [Osman Kavala](#). As on previous occasions, they urged (or in Kavala's case "exhorted") the Turkish authorities to ensure their immediate release from prison, as ruled by the European Court of Human rights – and delayed any further action till their next quarterly meeting. This time, they also extended their urging to include the immediate release of the HDP's other imprisoned co-chair, Figen Yüksekdağ, as the grounds for the Demirtaş decision apply equally in her case.

Kavala's case is the furthest along the line and could ultimately lead to Turkey having its role in the Council of Europe restricted, or even to them being excluded altogether, but this is a very protracted process.

On Tuesday, in a subsidiary case, the European Court [ruled](#) that Demirtaş and Yüksekdağ had been deprived of effective legal assistance to appeal their pretrial detentions due to the authorities preventing them from having private discussions with their lawyers and confiscating their documents. Cases such as this make a political point, but the few thousand Euros in damages awarded by the European Court hardly reflect the actual damage caused.

Sweden

Sweden continues to face a much more corrosive political test as they pursue their goal of persuading Turkey to allow them to join NATO. NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, and former Swedish Prime Minister, Carl Bildt, were [both in Turkey](#) for Erdoğan's presidential inauguration and for oiling the wheels of the negotiations that will begin again next week. With Sweden's new anti-terrorism law coming into force on 1 June, they argued that Sweden has fulfilled all Turkey's demands. On 4 June, Sweden's anti-NATO and pro-Kurdish protestors joined forces for a [march through Stockholm](#), with demonstrators carrying PKK flags. There have been a lot of concerns raised about the potential implications of the new loosely-worded law, but faced with this challenge, the Swedish police made clear that they were not going to interpret it as criminalising flag carrying. Perhaps mindful of Stoltenberg's warning not to play into the protestor's hands, Turkey's response – in the form of a [newspaper column](#) by their ambassador to Sweden, Yönet Can Tezel – posed as sympathetic to Swedish freedoms, but in fact remained deeply insidious. "Demonstrations are not normally a problem in themselves," he wrote in Aftonbladet, "but if terror-related groups hijack them, it is an attempt to deceive Sweden's benevolent, open society and the social trust on which it is based." Of course Sweden's authoritarian drift is not just due to Turkey.

Germany

Germany's Social democrat/liberal/green government seems as ready to appease Turkey as were its predecessors under Angela Merkel. They have not only tried and imprisoned Kurds living in Germany, but have also extradited Kurdish activists from other countries. Kenan Ayas, who was accepted as a refugee in Cyprus over ten years ago, has lost his final appeal against extradition and been [taken to Germany](#) for trial. He is accused of being a member of and working for the PKK.

Turkey's new government

Many column inches have been filled this week with speculation on the significance of Erdoğan's new cabinet. One thing is very clear, the optics of having just one woman does not trouble him. This is entirely in line with the conservative family values that he boasts of. Unsurprisingly, the headscarfed Mahinur Özdemir Göktas is Minister of Family and Social Services.

That the government includes some prominent Kurds is no reason to rejoice. Turkish nationalism does not have a problem with Kurds who accept Turkishness, and converts to Turkishness can be just as intolerant of Kurdishness as those born Turkish. Hakan Fidan, the former head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation who has become Foreign Minister, has a Kurdish father. Fidan has been involved both in the aborted Kurdish peace negotiations, and in drone assassinations. What is consistent, is his loyalty to Erdoğan – and trying to second guess where Erdoğan will go next is not easy. We can, perhaps, expect to see some better mannered politics, especially with the loss of the vicious Home Minister, Süleyman Soylu, but, as in the Swedish case, this need not coincide with any significant change of substance. We will have to judge the new government by their actions, but so far, the situation in Turkey seems to be violence and discrimination as usual.

Just in this last week, the HDP co-mayors of Patnos (Panos) – part of the tiny handful of HDP mayors who had not been removed from their posts – have both been [detained](#). Another Kurdish child, five-year-old Erdem Aşkan, has been [fatally hit](#) by a vehicle belonging to the security forces. Although a

witness claimed that the police sergeant was driving very fast and recklessly, the incident report puts the blame on the child. Eight members of the Peace Mothers are being [accused](#) of terrorism for sending money to their relatives in prison. A sixteen-year-old boy was [remanded in custody](#) for defacing a poster of Erdoğan. Many people, including children and the director of the Democratic Regions Party district organisation, were [detained](#) in violent house raids in Cizîr. A Mezopotamya Agency reporter was [detained](#) in a house raid in Ankara. Eight people were [detained](#) in house raids in Bedlîs. Six members of the HDP's İzmir Youth Assembly have been [remanded in custody](#). There are more [reports](#) of profoundly cruel treatment of political prisoners who are subjected to severe isolation and deprived of essential medical care. Can Atalay, a lawyer and human rights advocate who was imprisoned after the Gezi Park trial and has been elected as an MP for the Workers' Party of Turkey (TİP), has [not been released](#) from prison following the election, which is in breach of the constitution. Eight members of TİP were [detained](#) for protesting against the appointment of religious officials as "spiritual counsellors" in schools. New rectors of thirteen universities were [appointed](#) by presidential decree. The militia commander believed to be responsible for the brutal murder of Hevrîn Xelef as well as many other war crimes in Syria, has just [graduated](#) from Mardin Artuklu University, where he studied in the Department of Political Science and International Relations. Two Kurdish students have [reported](#) that the police have made it impossible for them to rent anywhere to live since they complained about racial harassment at the beginning of last year, and that the police tell everyone they are in contact with that the students are "terrorists". A village in Şırnak has been [attacked](#) by military and police. And the opposition appears to have gone AWOL. Başak Demirtaş, the wife of the imprisoned politician, who campaigned tirelessly for a Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu presidency, [reported](#) that after the crowds called for her husband's death at Erdoğan's victory speech, not one member of the opposition reached out to her in solidarity.

The first post-election meeting of Turkey's National Security Council has [stated](#) that attacks on North and East Syria will continue. A Turkish [drone attack](#) in the Sulaymaniyah district of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq killed one person and injured another. And there has been yet another [assassination](#) of a

Kurdish exile from Turkey living in Sulaymaniyah city. Hüseyin Arasan was a member of the Mesopotamia Workers' Association, whose chairman previously observed, "We face threats and blackmail from Turkish intelligence and security services constantly here".

Semalka and Makhmour

But the resistance also goes on, and I can end on a slightly more positive note. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has now [reopened](#) the Semalka Crossing between the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and North and East Syria. The crossing, which provides autonomous North and East Syria with their only link out of Syria, and so access to vital supplies, had been shut by the KDP without explanation for nearly four weeks. And last Sunday, after 16 days, the Iraqi army [withdrew from its blockade](#) of Makhmour refugee camp, backing off from its plans to encircle the camp with prison-like fencing after concerted resistance from camp residents and prolonged negotiations between camp representatives and the Iraqi government. This wasn't the first such stand-off and Makhmour residents know that their camp could come under pressure again. The co-chair of the camp's People's Assembly, Yusuf Kara, stressed that any future attack on their camp and their right to self-determination would be met with resistance.

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