

The power of hate – a weekly news review

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thought to have been killed, with many more brutally injured. Rioters attacked Greek homes, businesses, and religious buildings, and also, for good measure, those of Armenians and Jews.

This was a planned pogrom, and is part of a long history of attacks on Turkey's Greek minority that goes back to the beginning of the republic. The bomb was planted by a Turkish agent; a sensationalised account of the bombing was spread through a government-supporting newspaper, which organised large scale printing and circulation; thousands of rioters were brought into Istanbul from other areas and provided with tools to carry out their destruction; and the police stood by while they attacked.

The politics of hate is a favourite tactic of despotic rule, and, although this has long been recognised, it is put into play again and again. It turns humanity's positive craving for community into a negative antipathy to "outsiders" in order to make people unaware of their own exploitation and to fragment potential opposition to those in power. In compensation, people are given false pride and a scapegoat on whom to blame their troubles. The Turkish state is based on ethnic nationalism, and Turkish governments of all parties have always promoted prejudice against minorities; however, they are far from alone in encouraging hate.

The British empire has a long track record of prejudice, and it is also claimed that, before the Istanbul pogrom, the British Government deliberately encouraged Turkey in its anti-Greek sentiments in order to counter Greek plans for a UN sponsored referendum on the future of Cyprus, which the British wanted to keep under their own control.

Then, as now, the Turkish people were suffering from economic failure, so the pogrom also served to enable popular anger to find an outlet. Parallels with current political scenarios even include an American response that attempted, for the sake of relations with strategically-placed Turkey, to equate victims and perpetrators, with almost identical letters being sent to the prime ministers in Athens and in Ankara.

Threatening Greece

Today's Turkish government is again trying to bolster its popular support by uniting an economically battered population against Greece – not so much the Greeks in Turkey, where the Greek population is now reduced to just a few thousand, but Greece itself. Turkey has never been reconciled to losing control over the Greek Islands in the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, agreed in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. There are complicated legal arguments about the interpretation of this and subsequent treaties, but, more significant, is a sense of historic right. Claiming historic rights in this way raises questions about why one historic moment should be privileged over another – go back further and this was all Byzantium – and they open the door for endless wars.

The value of the islands is hugely enhanced by the access they give to the surrounding waters and the mineral wealth beneath. Recent years have seen alarming tensions and standoffs between Turkey and Greece over rights to explore for gas in the Eastern Mediterranean, and there have been numerous claims and counter claims about infringement of airspace. In addition, the Turkish government is angry that Greece has been lobbying the United States not to sell F-16 fighter jets to Turkey.

President Erdoğan has taken his bellicose rhetoric towards Greece to a new level. Speaking at an air show last Saturday, he threatened that if Greece did not remove all military from the islands “we may come down suddenly one night.” This phrase, which he repeated later that day, is the same that he has used many times to threaten an imminent invasion of northern Syria, and that he used in 2017 to threaten the Kurdistan Region of Iraq when they held a referendum on independence. Nazlan Ertan recalls, in Al-Monitor, that the phrase originated in a love poem, but was then used to refer to Turkey's intervention into Cyprus in 1974.

Erdoğan also told the Greeks, “Don't forget Izmir.” The recapture of Izmir (Smyrna in Greek) sealed Turkey's victory in the 1919-1922 Greco Turkish war; but, of all the atrocities committed in the war, the worst was the burning of that city, which followed four days later. The population was then half Greek,

and Turkish troops torched the Greek and Armenian quarters, causing the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Tens of thousands more were deported to labour camps and probable death, and most of the rest of the Greek and Armenian population were evacuated as refugees.

While Erdoğan's statements are clearly designed to appeal to a domestic audience and win back his leaching support, the European Union spokesperson commented that "The continuous hostile remarks by the political leadership of Turkey against Greece and the Greek people raise serious concerns".

Oppressing Kurdish prisoners

Kurds – who make up 1/5 to a 1/4 of Turkey's population – are treated to a different sort of hate. As Muslims, they are not officially recognised as a minority at all, but rather as inferior Turks who must be forced to accept their Turkishness. Not that this has prevented the most primitive forms of anti-Kurdish racism.

Abuse of Turkey's Kurdish citizens is endemic, and it is led from the top. As in other structurally racist societies, Turkish racism is reinforced by the justice system. Any promotion of Kurdish rights is criminalised; large and growing numbers of Kurds are political prisoners; and treatment of Kurdish political prisoners is getting increasingly harsh.

Şirin Keskin, in prison in Samsun-Bafra, told his father, "We experience psychological repression and violations of rights every moment. But that's not all. There are cell raids, physical abuse and forced transfers. The guards confiscate our books, letters, notebooks, pens, daily notes, diaries and radios. An investigation has been opened against twenty prisoners on the basis of false facts. The prison management wants to prevent us from having visitors and receiving medical treatment. On the way to the visiting cells and to the hospital, we are subjected to degrading treatment every time."

Rojhat Bat, in prison, like many Kurdish activists, for "membership in a terrorist organization", was supposed to be released on 26 August. He explains that he

was denied release “on the grounds that I had participated in activities that actually posed no problem for the prison administration. These activities generally included borrowing books from the library, participating in sports and social, cultural and artistic activities and getting certificates from workshops.” Earlier, Bat had reported to his sister that a chief prison guard had told him, “you will die here. I will kill you; you will not get out of here alive.”

83-year-old Mehmet Emin Özkan, who has been in prison for 27 years and suffers from multiple serious conditions, has again been taken to hospital. Although hospital reports have repeatedly called for his release, this has been denied. He cannot look after himself and has been cared for by his son, who was held in the same prison, and a cellmate. Özkan was convicted on the basis of witnesses who have since recanted their testimony, and it is believed that the murder for which he has been punished was carried out by the secret state.

Seriously-ill eighty-year-old, Makbule Özer, has been allowed out of prison as she cannot meet her own needs on her own – but only after widespread protests. Earlier, it was reported that the official doctor who examined her could not communicate with her as no Kurdish interpreter was provided.

Gökhan Yıldırım, who has been on hunger strike to demand a fair trial, was finally let out of prison on Tuesday, but only after 256 days without food had put his health seriously at risk. And other prisoners remain on hunger strike for their rights.

On Saturday, it was reported that another prisoner had died in suspicious circumstances. Engin Korcum, aged 35, had rope marks around his neck. His family was told they must take the body directly to their home village for burial and not pass through the centre of Dersim as that would be considered propaganda, and the village headman was forbidden from attending the funeral.

Meanwhile, the Istanbul justice vigil by prisoners' families was again attacked by police, and demonstrators and journalists were beaten and detained.

Last week's arrest of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) deputy, Semra Güzel, whose parliamentary immunity was lifted in March, was not only deeply worrying for being yet another example of the criminalisation of Kurdish politics and the denial of democracy. Turkey's Human Rights Association has filed a complaint over the manner of her arrest and the widely-shared video that showed the police attempting to humiliate her by handcuffing her, and pulling on her hair to try and force her to bow her head. Their complaint states, "The dissemination of these images, which contain numerous criminal offences, also constitutes an offense of incitement to hatred and hostility." And they comment, "The publication of such images seeks to normalize acts of torture and ill-treatment and provides impunity for the officials who committed the crime. It is well known that the driving factor behind the continuation of gross human rights abuses is impunity. The perpetrators can be confident that they will not be brought to justice and punished."

Playing the refugee card, and other prejudices

While many hopes are being pinned on the Turkish elections, which must take place by next June, all the parties, other than the HDP and the small left parties, compete in playing the racist populist card. The Kurds have been attacked under every Turkish government; and, today, these racist parties also boast of the hard line they will take against Syrian refugees.

The principal beneficiary from the drop in support for the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been the right-wing nationalist İYİ Party, which is running third in terms of popular support and is part of the main opposition alliance in which the biggest party is the Republican People's Party (CHP). This week, İYİ Party leader, Meral Aksener, announced an action plan that would strip Syrian refugees of their benefits and even deny them access to parks and beaches. Aksener claimed that Turkey has become an "immigrant warehouse" and "nearly a garbage dump" for immigrant-adverse Europe, and she promised that, by September 2026, all Syrians would be returned to Syria. Also in her plan, illegal immigrants would be put in concentration camps before being sent back.

Such rhetoric fuels increasingly violent anti-Syrian racism. Last Monday, Fares Mohammed Al-Ali, a seventeen-year-old Syrian refugee who had just secured a place at medical school, was stabbed to death on the street in Antakya.

Members of the main opposition CHP have been equally harsh – notably the mayor of Bolu. Istanbul's mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, has responded to the Interior Minister's politically-inspired claims that the municipality is employing terror suspects, not by defending their workers, but by sacking them. Fired workers have now been protesting for six weeks, and have been meeting with human rights organisation, lawyers, and trade unions. A newly-sacked worker, Durmuş Savaş, has explained that he was sacked from his cleaning job on the basis of a 1997 lawsuit that, despite hours of torture and nine months remand in prison, was never brought to prosecution. He also recalls how he and others spent days and nights guarding the ballot boxes to ensure that İmamoğlu was not cheated of his election win.

In response to a suggestion by the CHP's Gursel Tekin that the HDP could be given ministries in a future government, İYİ Party leader, Aksener has made clear her antagonism towards any form of association with the HDP, cutting across the more conciliatory approach championed by CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and making it difficult for HDP supporters to have any faith in the main opposition alliance – much to the delight of the ruling AKP.

Attacking Kurds across the border

None of the mainstream opposition parties have dared to criticise Turkey's invasions and ongoing attacks in Syria, which are mainly targeted at ending any form of Kurdish autonomy, as well as at Turkish aggrandisement.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have released a long list of attacks carried out by Turkey in August, all despite the 2019 ceasefires.

Turkish attacks into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have also been carried out by different governments, though not generally with the ferociousness with which they are being pursued today. While these attacks are ostensibly aimed at destroying the PKK's bases, Turkey has taken the opportunity to establish an

extensive military network. Kurdistan Watch claims that Turkey now has 53 outposts and bases, and 35 smaller observation points, and that the list includes nine large military bases, four of them built this year. This huge military presence, and the constant attacks, restrict the PKK's room for manoeuvre, but the war is not providing the Turkish government with the vote-winning victory that they crave. PKK counter attacks are inflicting casualties and destroying military equipment. War also puts a large financial toll on Turkey's beleaguered economy. It has been calculated that, overall, and including the consequent reduction in income from international investment, Turkey's forty-year war against the Kurds has cost the country trillions of dollars. But, the CHP and İYİ Party, and all parties in the main opposition block, are supportive of the war against the Kurds, and unlikely to challenge this expenditure.

Turkey's attacks on the PKK are being aided by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KDP is not anti-Kurd, but they have tied their own political fortunes to the Turkish state, and they also give no quarter to anyone on the political left. Generally, the KDP avoids direct confrontations with the PKK as they don't like to be seen fighting other Kurds, but, on Monday, a group of five PKK guerrillas were attacked by a Turkish reconnaissance aircraft, killing three and injuring the other two. Shortly afterwards, KDP forces arrived on the scene, and the two injured guerrillas have not been seen since. The PKK are concerned that this was a coordinated attack, and they have demanded the return of their fighters.

Criminalising homosexuality

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq's patriarchal system thrives on limiting women's rights, and also the rights of the LGBT+ community. A new bill being put to the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, with cross party support, plans to criminalise homosexual activity and all promotion of LGBT+ issues. Its targets will include politicians who support LGBT+ rights, and journalists who write about them.

This prejudice is backed up with reference to traditional Islamic morality, as are the even more draconian rules against homosexuality in Iran.

Iran's Hengaw Human Rights Organization reports that LGBT activists, Zahra Sediqi Hamedani, 31, and Elham Chubdar, 24, were sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Court of Urmia for "Corruption on Earth" through "promoting homosexuality." Hengaw notes that Hamedani, who was arrested on her way to Turkey, was not allowed access to a lawyer.

"Caliphate" of hate

ISIS has created the epitome of a regime built on hate. This week, the security services of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have been continuing their sweep of the vast Al Hol detention camp, which houses people suspected of ISIS sympathies. Many of the camp inmates are determined to organise life there according to ISIS rules, and the Administration simply does not have the resources to contain them. This security sweep has uncovered more examples of ISIS brutality. The security officers discovered a Yazidi girl – still only 18 – who was captured and sold as a sex-slave when she was a child, and passed on from one ISIS fighter to another. When she came to Al Hol, her ISIS husband was imprisoned, and she was left with his other wives. The sweep found four women in chains with marks of torture, and classrooms where another generation were being taught to hate everyone who doesn't share their particular form of fascism. (I won't share video links, these women need privacy.)

Searching the camp is dangerous work. Two SDF fighters who were supporting the operation were killed when they uncovered an ISIS cell of two women and five men disguised in women's clothes. One of the ISIS men was also killed as he attempted to escape. The security sweep has also captured two Iraqis who have talked about special guesthouses for ISIS in Turkey, and ISIS fighters being treated in Turkish hospitals. The Turkish government's prejudices can align comfortably with ISIS, especially when it comes to hatred of the Kurds.

Despite all the evidence of Turkish support for ISIS, Erdoğan continues to claim that Turkey is the only country that is providing ISIS with serious opposition. On Thursday, he announced the capture of a leading ISIS figure. The SDF claims that the captured man had been under Turkish protection, and

that Erdoğan was afraid that he would be assassinated like the previous ISIS leaders, who were found on Turkish occupied land.

Although ISIS has carried out unspeakable cruelties, it is far from unique in building power through hate. And ISIS fighters who are driven, through hate, to do evil things are not intrinsically evil. But, if we are to counter the forces currently controlling our world, we need to be aware of how those forces use hate to consolidate their power and to divide those who oppose them.

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