

Something rotten in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – a weekly news review

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It is now over seven years since most of the world learnt about the Yazidis. For a short time, international media carried international hearts to Iraq's Şengal (Sinjar) Mountains, and to the families fleeing genocide and sexual slavery. But news keeps churning, and cameras and sympathy are now focused elsewhere. On Tuesday, Turkey's targeted assassination of the Co-chair of the Autonomous Governing Council in Şengal passed without international comment. Merwan Bedel was killed by a drone when travelling in his car with his two children as they got ready to celebrate the Yazidi holiday of Rojiya Ezî. The children were injured, but have survived.

This attack follows the targeting of a Yazidi delegation and bombing of a Yazidi hospital in August. The statement of condemnation put out by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) describes it as "almost a continuation of the genocide that ISIS could not complete".

Bedel was a commander in the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBŞ), but that does not make him a legitimate target. The YBŞ was established as a Yazidi self-defence force to protect the community from suffering a further genocide. Yazidi history claims that the ISIS attack was the 74th genocide carried out against them. The Yazidis' legitimate desire for self-protection cannot be used as an excuse for yet another attack.

The YBŞ has never posed any threat to Turkey, which has no reason to intervene in the area at all. As Human Rights Watch explains, in a useful article that looks at targeted killings and international law, "Outside of armed conflict, lethal force may only be used when strictly necessary to prevent imminent harm to life, when arrest is not reasonably possible." There was no threat to Turkish lives here – imminent or otherwise – but Turkey portrays the YBŞ as synonymous with the PKK – as they do the YPG in Syria – and they have persuaded much of the world to join them in labelling the PKK as terrorists. The YBŞ was built up and trained by YPG and PKK fighters, who were the people that saved the Yazidis from total destruction by ISIS and helped them recover their homeland. They, too, follow Abdullah Öcalan's political philosophy, but they are an independent group which is now officially recognised by the Iraqi army as part of the Popular Mobilisation Forces.

The Iraqi government makes the occasional show of concern about breaches of their sovereignty, and their Security Media Cell referred to Bedel as a martyr, but both the Federal Government in Bagdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Hewlêr (Erbil) would like to see the YBŞ and the Autonomous Governing Council in Şengal disappear. Then they could get on with dividing up control over the Yazidi region in line with the Sinjar Agreement, which was made in October 2020 without consulting the Yazidis. (Şengal is one of the disputed territories, claimed by both Bagdad and Hewlêr.)

The YBS claims that Turkey's attack was made possible through collaboration with Parastin, the intelligence service of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The KDP dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government and is both economically and politically dependent on Turkey. The Kurdistan Region's counter-terrorism directorate announced the killing as "The death of a PKK military official".

Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's Kurdistan24 news website, makes no reference to this attack on a Yazidi leader and Yazidi democracy, but it does give detailed coverage of a ceremony on Thursday to rebury the remains of 41 Yazidis murdered by ISIS in 2014. A letter was read out at the ceremony on behalf of the Prime Minister, where "He pointed out that Kurdistan Region has always been a safe haven for 'our Yezidi brothers and sisters'".

As well as attacks by Turkey, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and the disputed territories are suffering from a resurgence of attacks by ISIS. Sleeper cells totalling an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 militants are carrying out guerrilla warfare, exploiting the lack of unity and coordination between different Kurdish parties and between the Kurdistan Regional Government and Bagdad. Firat News Agency reports that, since 10 November, these attacks have resulted in the deaths of 22 peshmerga and 5 civilians; and they give a telling reason for such high casualties. They claim that equipment supplied by the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS is 'apparently' being distributed to the KDP's special units, which are focused on supporting Turkey's fight against the PKK, and that there have been complaints from high-ranking peshmerga about lack of equipment and manpower in the areas combatting ISIS.

This is a long way from the situation in 2014, when the PKK came down from the mountains to join the fight to rid Iraq of ISIS, and Masoud Barzani, then President of the Kurdistan Region, personally thanked them for their role. Now the KDP won't even return the bodies of PKK fighters killed in an ambush by KDP peshmerga. Peace Mothers have been holding a protest on the Syria-Iraq border calling for their return since early October.

Something is rotten in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, of which collusion with Turkey is just a part. The large and growing number of people attempting to emigrate, despite the risks, is testament to this. There have been a number of talks and articles exploring the push factors that are driving the emigrants, but most can be summed up as lack of hope, and lack of a future for anyone not connected with the two dominant families and their political parties. Abdulla Hawez observes, "Many Iraqi Kurds have come to believe the 'economic independence' was designed for the elite to plunder the region's wealth." Meanwhile, attempts at protest are closed down with increasing authoritarianism.

The extent of the region's corruption was exposed this week in an article by Zack Kopplin, published in The American Prospect. Kopplin has been looking at the property investments of the Barzani family, which dominates the KDP. He mentions hugely valuable real estate in Kurdistan and in Dubai, but the focus of his own investigation is the Barzanis' exploitation of corporate secrecy in the United States. His researches uncovered \$75 Million of secret investments, which he considers to be just the tip of the iceberg. These examples only came to light because the lawyers made errors, which is unlikely to happen very often.

Responding to the article, Masrour Barzani made only a clumsy attempt to refute the message, choosing, instead, to libel the messenger – and an unconnected woman – by claiming he was having an affair with a political activist wife of a former MP, who he has never met. As Kurdistan Watch point out, in Kurdistan's deeply conservative society, such an accusation can put the woman's life at risk.

Oligarchic politics with extreme levels of corruption, coupled with privatisation and austerity policies, and with delayed and withheld public-sector salaries, have forced a large part of the population into deep economic difficulties. Protests over what is happening have been met with violent suppression. This time last year, young protestors were shot dead by security forces. Many activists and journalists are in prison, convicted on widely-criticised evidence or awaiting oft-postponed trials. They accuse the authorities of torture.

Regardless, there are currently large student protests, which have continued for a third week – despite beatings and tear gas and the arrest of dozens of protestors, and despite many telling the Morning Star that “they had been tortured and electrocuted while in custody and subjected to threats and intimidation”.

Serious problems with the region and its governance are clear for all to see, but that hasn't stopped western governments queuing up to show their friendship to the Kurdistan Regional Government. A letter received this week by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani from the US Secretary of Defence states, “There is a special relationship between the Kurdistan Region and America and it is a relationship based on values and mutual respect”. The US Consulate General in Erbil was quick to commend President Nechirvan Barzani “for his remarks about the importance of an independent judiciary”, although they can't but be aware of the reality of political detentions, as substantiated by independent human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and the Christian Peacemaker Teams. For the people of the region, such uncritical support can act as a poisoned chalice that serves to strengthen the government and allow it to clamp down on protest with impunity.

As planned and promised, the US-led coalition in Iraq announced on Thursday that it had moved from ‘combat’ to training and advice. They hope that this will appease Iranian demands for the US military to leave the country, though, as France 24 points out, the change is largely semantic; “In effect, the about 2,500 US and 1,000 other coalition troops deployed in Iraq will remain there. They have been acting as advisers and trainers since mid-2020.”

The US has also made clear that its forces will remain in North and East Syria to continue the fight against ISIS attacks. Their presence – and control of the airspace – is vital, too, to prevent a further Turkish invasion. Afrîn, Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ayn), and Girê Spî (Tell Abyad) provide awful reminders of what can happen when the US and Russia don't block Turkish aggression. In an article to mark Human Rights Day (10 December), Firat News Agency gave figures for human rights abuses in occupied Afrîn. They noted that, “Afrin Human Rights

Organization documented that kidnapping and ransom in Afrin has been turned into a business by the Turkish state.” And that, “According to the Autonomous Administration system, at least 1 house in almost every village of Afrin... has been turned into a torture station where the occupiers hold the people they kidnapped for ransom.”

Turkish occupation in north Syria is enabling the re-establishment of ISIS both directly, by providing ISIS cells with safe bases, and indirectly, through increasing regional instability. Last weekend, acting on a tip off, North and East Syrian security forces intercepted weapons being smuggled to ISIS members in Al Hol refugee camp. The weapons are said to have come from Turkish-occupied Girê Spî.

This week, it is events in Turkey that must be summarised in just a few paragraphs, though enough has happened to fill a book.

The unmitigated brutality of Turkey’s politicised ‘justice’ system was exposed in three particularly horrific cases. On Thursday, Kandira High Security Prison announced the death in custody of 28-year-old Kurdish political prisoner, Garibe Gezer, who had worked for the Democratic Regions Party (DBP) in Mardin. The prison claim she took her own life, but this has been questioned by both her sister and her lawyer.

Gezer had made sure that the public learnt about her torture and mistreatment by the prison authorities, and she had filed a detailed complaint through her lawyer. Now she can no longer bear witness. Her accounts revealed a nightmare of long periods of solitary confinement, including in a padded cell, interspersed with physical and sexual assault. Following the latter, she tried to kill herself and to set fire to her cell, but in their last conversation her sister had found her looking forward to the future. In any case the prison is responsible for her death.

Even before her imprisonment in 2016, the state had ensured Gezer’s young life was full of tragedy. Of her two brothers, one was killed in the violence that met the protests in support of Kobanê in 2014. The other was shot and paralysed by the police when he tried to enquire about his brother’s murder.

The day before Gezer's death, the HDP Women's Assembly issued a public statement on the condition of Aysel Tuğluk, who has also been in prison since 2016 and is now very seriously ill and unable to look after herself. Tuğluk was one of the lawyers on Abdullah Öcalan's defence team at his trial in 1999. She was elected co-leader of the Democratic Society Party – a predecessor of the HDP – when the co-chair system was first introduced, and she has served as an MP. But today she is suffering from severe and progressive memory loss. Because of the nature of her illness, her colleagues had so far kept it private, but they now feel they must forgo this basic privacy in order to fight for Tuğluk's rights. Early in the year, a committee of nine doctors concluded, after a lengthy examination, that her medical and everyday needs could not be met in prison and that she should be released. But, as has happened in many other cases, this expert view was over-ridden by the Forensic Medical Institute in Istanbul. The Turkish Human Rights Association states that there are 1,605 seriously ill people in Turkish jails, of whom around 600 are in critical condition. Most of these seriously ill prisoners will die in prison, or be released only when they are at death's door.

Tuğluk's decline began after her mother's death in 2017. She was allowed out for the funeral, which was attacked by a racist mob who claimed to be preventing the burial of a 'terrorist'. The family even had to exhume the body and move it elsewhere to prevent it being dug up by others. We cannot be sure of the cause of dementia in this particular case, but post-traumatic stress has been shown to increase risk by over 50%, and depression is a risk factor too.

At the beginning of the week, an indictment – again under terrorism legislation – was served on Osman Şiban, one of two men thrown from a helicopter by Turkish soldiers in September 2020, and the only one to survive. No-one has been detained for the lethal attack on the two men. It was journalists who reported the incident who were arrested, though they were eventually released at the first hearing.

On Wednesday, Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, turned his scattergun terrorism allegations against Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, which is run by the Republican People's Party (CHP). Soylu claimed that recent recruits

working at the municipality included 557 people linked to designated 'terrorist' organisations, including 455 linked to the PKK. He gave no evidence to support this claim, and the CHP spokesperson asked why, supposing this were true, was no legal action being taken.

Meanwhile, different Kurdish groups are continuing the daily rolling demonstration outside the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. They hope to persuade the institutions to take action to end Öcalan's isolation and put pressure on Turkey to allow prison visits by his family and lawyers. Delegations have met with officials from the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and with the Deputy Secretary General of the Council of Europe.

The Council of Europe's Secretary General has stressed the importance of "swift and effective implementation" of European Court of Human Rights Judgements. However, the Turkish government, which faces possible sanctions and even exclusion from the Council for failing to implement the court's judgement calling for the release of Osman Kavala, is in no mood to listen. President Erdoğan has made clear his contempt for the European organisations to which Turkey has signed up, claiming that Turkey does not recognise the court's decisions.

Turkey is in the grips of a brutal authoritarianism, but support for the government is continuing to diminish. Nothing can be taken for granted, but we could be witnessing the violent – and probably protracted – death throes of a violent regime. Perhaps, one day, Kurdish MPs will no longer have their microphones cut off when they speak in their mother tongue, or be banned for three parliamentary sessions for quoting the motto, "Democracy and peace to Turkey, freedom to Kurdistan", as happened to HDP MPs this week.