

Who cares about the Kurds? – a weekly news review

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As Turkish invasion threats continue to cast their shadow over northern Syria, and pundits dissect the latest statements to speculate on whether either the United States or Russia will do a deal to stand aside and let Turkish ground forces go in; as Turkish forces continue to pound the mountains of northern Iraq, and the PKK reports plans by the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to provide even greater assistance to the Turkish takeover of their region; and as Turkish authoritarianism makes daily news with new abuses, while Turkey continues to be regarded as an important partner by countries

that boast of their democratic credentials; this seems a good time to ask, who cares about the Kurds?

The United States and Russia in Syria

Both the United States and Russia are in Syria for their own reasons, and it is these that guide their response to Turkey's threats. There are Russian bases in the areas that Turkey has said it will attack first, and these would need to get out of the way. Russia supports the Syrian regime of President Assad, while Turkey supports the Islamist groups fighting against the regime, but damaging Turkish relations with the US – its NATO 'ally' – is an important Russian objective. At the same time, Russia recognises that Turkish threats may help to force the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to work with the Damascus regime without Assad having to concede to their demands for democracy and regional autonomy.

I am not going to attempt to speculate on what might have been agreed when the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, visited Ankara on Wednesday, or how Turkey's veto on Swedish and Finnish accession to NATO may have strengthened Turkey's hand. However, I can note reports that both Russia and the Syrian army have boosted their strength in the region.

The United States continues to try and dissuade Turkey from a further Syrian invasion, but this is not a guarantee of protection. Their ostensible reason for being in Syria is to continue the fight against ISIS, yet, as the Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Mazloun Abdi, points out, "If a large NATO army attacks us, the fight against ISIS will take a back seat. ISIS will be strengthened by an invasion."

The SDF continues to talk to America and Russia and the Syrian government in the hope of preventing a Turkish attack, while they prepare for the worst. As Abdi told Ronahî TV, "We have been making preparations since the occupation of Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî. The people will resist together with us. It will be a hard war. I do not believe that Turkey will win. We advocate resolving all problems through dialogue. However, if there is an attack, we will defend ourselves." On Tuesday, the SDF General Command "confirmed the

SDF's readiness to coordinate with the forces of the Damascus government to thwart any potential Turkish attack and protect Syrian territories." The Autonomous Administration has always insisted that it is part of Syria, but they do not want to return to the situation that existed in 2011 and give up their hard-won autonomy, and Assad has shown no intention of abandoning his desire for central control.

Although there has not yet been a ground invasion, Turkey and its mercenaries keep up daily attacks in northern Syria, and these have only got worse. But the Russians and Americans, who are supposed to be guarantors of the Turkish ceasefires, do nothing. I won't attempt to list all Turkey's attacks, but, on Wednesday, the Press Centre of the Manbij Military Council announced that in the previous ten days 445 bombs hit villages around Manbij; on Thursday, a drone hit a vegetable market in Qamishlo; and, last Saturday, Turkey was accused of using cluster bombs on Til Temir.

Little news gets out from the areas already under Turkish occupation, but in a measure of the dangers facing those who remained there, Firat News Agency reports on a woman in Afrîn who has now been abducted for the third time. A week ago riots broke out in several of the occupied areas. These were triggered by price hikes by the Turkish-owned electricity company, which saw its offices burnt and ransacked, but protestors also attacked council offices and called for the departure of Turkish troops. The protests were violently put down by the Turkish-backed military police.

The view from Europe – Sweden and Finland

For a cross-section of European views on the region, we can turn to the latest debate on Turkey's relationship with the European Union, which took place in Strasbourg this week; but before looking at that, I want to go to Sweden and Finland. Here, Kurds have found themselves at the centre of new and unwanted interest as a result of President Erdoğan's opportunistic response to the Nordic countries' applications to join NATO. Erdoğan has attempted to use Turkey's veto, as a NATO member, to force them to follow Turkey's own harsh line against their Kurdish populations. He is demanding that they clamp

down on all Kurdish organisations that Turkey deems linked to 'terrorism', that they extradite Kurds to be tried in Turkish courts, and that they lift the embargo on exporting arms that they imposed in response to Turkey's invasion of Syria in 2019. While the two countries have made it clear that their applications should be considered together, Turkey's main target is the 150,000 Kurds living in Sweden.

At the centre of this new attention, is Amineh Kakabaveh, the Kurdish Swedish MP from Iran – and former Komala guerrilla – who holds the balance of power in Sweden's Parliament. Last November, Kakabaveh, who is not a member of any group since she resigned from the Left Party, agreed to lend her vote to the Social Democrats, so enabling them to form a minority government. In exchange, the government promised to deepen Sweden's already strong ties with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant political party in North and East Syria, which has instituted Abdullah Öcalan's ideas in the region. This week, the future of the Swedish government was again on a knife edge, with opposition parties calling a vote of no confidence in the justice minister. Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson supported her minister and said that if he went, she would resign. The future of the government again depended on Kakabaveh. When she abstained, so allowing the government to survive, she claimed that she had received assurances from the party secretary that the government would not concede to Turkey's demands and would continue to honour the earlier agreement. But government assurances seem not to have been as clear as she had hoped, and she has now warned that she will vote against the government in next week's critical budget debate if she is not given a firm commitment.

How people in Sweden react to all this will clearly depend on their general political leanings. Most people don't like to see their country held to ransom, and Turkey is demanding that they abandon principles of democracy and human rights that are central to Sweden's self-image. Anger against Turkey might encourage greater understanding and awareness of the predicament faced by the Kurds, but some will be tempted to blame the Kurds for bringing these problems to Sweden, and will also resent Kakabaveh's kingmaker role.

It would be very difficult for the Swedish government to agree to all Turkey's demands even if they wanted to. Agreeing to extraditions that have already been rejected by the courts would destroy judicial independence and break international law on human rights. However, Sweden has hardened its attitude towards Kurdish refugees in the last few years, and they may try and agree a compromise. For the moment, the situation appears to have reached stalemate.

To add to the anger against Turkey, when the Turkish government was approached before the two countries put in their applications, they gave no indication that they would put any conditions on accession. Finish newspaper, Ilta Sanomat, has published an interview with Finish President, Sauli Niinistö, who claims that Turkey had repeatedly reassured him and NATO that membership would not be a problem, including in a direct phone call between himself and Erdoğan. He even observed that, had this not been the case, "no one would have sent an application there".

The European Union

Turkey's attempt to bully Finland and Sweden featured large in the European Parliament debate on Turkey; however, half the speakers mentioned neither Turkey's treatment of the Kurds, nor Turkey's invasions into Iraq or Syria. A high proportion of the speakers were Greek or Cypriot and focussed on Turkey's threats to Greece and 48-year-old occupation of northern Cyprus – mostly without thinking to compare these with Turkey's recent occupations of Kurdish regions and threatened attacks on Syria.

The EU's Turkey Rapporteur, Nacho Sánchez Amor, made clear that Turkey's disastrous, and deliberately worsening, democratic standards were totally unacceptable, and could not be ignored for the sake of "crude geopolitical considerations". However, his report still contains a sting in the tail. It "reiterates [the EU's] firm and unambiguous condemnation of the violent terrorist attacks by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been on the EU list of terrorist organisations since 2002". The PKK are fighting a war of liberation in Turkey, where they have long demanded negotiations for a peaceful settlement that respects Kurdish rights; and they pose no threat to

any EU countries. When the terrorist designation of the PKK was tested in the Belgian courts, the judges ruled that it was not a terrorist organisation, subject to criminal law, but a non-state party to an armed conflict, and bound by the rules of war. The EU's own terrorist designation of the PKK is currently being examined by the EU's Court of Justice in Luxembourg. So why give Turkey this weapon to use against the PKK, and against all other Kurdish opposition – since Turkey refuses to make any distinctions?

And there is another important problem with the EU debate. Decisions made by the European Parliament have only limited impact on EU policy. The anger and concern shown by all the speakers was not reflected in the comments of the EU Commissioner, who gave the official EU position. Although he acknowledged that Turkey continues to move away from the EU, and that Turkey's EU accession negotiations remain at a standstill, his approach was very much business as usual. He even described how the EU has “recently launched a new instrument... that opens the door to the European Fund for Sustainable Development to Turkey”.

While other speakers argued that Turkey failed to conform to EU standards of democracy, rule of law, and human rights, the two left MEPs from Ireland pointed out EU hypocrisy with respect to its own “standards”.

Turkish authoritarianism

The rapporteur observed in his introductory speech “in recent days we have had to add new cases of violation of rights and, if we waited two weeks, we would have another handful of new cases”. Turkish authoritarianism only gets worse. Last week, many of the people detained in Turkey last Friday were arrested on terrorism charges, including one politician who is over 90% disabled and has to be connected to an oxygen cylinder. On Wednesday, at least 21 journalists were detained in Diyarbakir, and the Jin News offices were raided. And Van's Chief Public Prosecutor has opened an investigation into 22 of the mourners who attended the funeral of Mehmet Zeki Çelebi, who was murdered – it is presumed by the Turkish state – in Slemeni in May.

The Human Rights Foundation of Turkey has released data on the harassment and repression of human rights defenders in the first four months of this year. During that time, 1374 people faced judicial harassment, 988 were undergoing criminal proceedings, and 23 were sentenced to prison – with one given life without parole, and other sentences averaging nearly ten years.

The last two weeks have seen more bans for concerts and theatre. The Union of Turkish Bar Associations is planning to challenge these bans as arbitrary and unconstitutional.

International journalist groups have put out a joint statement condemning the government's "disinformation bill", which would allow prison sentences for "spreading disinformation". Journalists argue that the ambiguous legislation will be used to prevent freedom of expression.

The callousness of Turkish government thinking was demonstrated by a comment last week from Turkey's Finance Minister, who carelessly acknowledged that Turkey's preferred economic policies were not good for those on low incomes.

As could be expected, the Turkish government has dismissed the EU's criticism, and the EU with it. It has also upbraided more European ambassadors for not clamping down on Kurdish protests in line with the Turkish definition of terrorist activity.

In Iraq

The EU debate did include three passing mentions of Turkey's invasion into Iraq, but generally this is a war that the world prefers not to notice. Despite the lack of reporting, fighting has been increasingly intense and there are accounts of a military hospital full of injured Turkish soldiers, and of other soldiers reluctant to participate. Among other casualties of the war, the Kurdistan Green Party has claimed that Turkey has destroyed three million trees.

America supports Turkey's attacks, accepting Turkey's claim that their military takeover can be justified as self-defence against the PKK, who America lists as terrorists. While the US is quick to condemn every attack in Iraq that is attributed to Iranian-linked groups, such as the attack in Erbil on Wednesday night, they never protest Turkish airstrikes in Iraq, even when these are aimed at civilian targets.

America and Europe are keen to work with the business-friendly government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, despite knowing it to be corrupt and increasingly authoritarian. The main party in that government, the KDP, also supports Turkey's attacks on their own region. On Monday, the PKK warned that they had received intelligence that the KDP's peşmerga forces were planning to besiege the PKK from the south and turn the war into an openly inter-Kurdish conflict.

The KDP is run by the Barzani family as a personal fiefdom, but they have increasingly turned themselves into vassals of the Turkish "emperor", Erdoğan. Now, it seems they even want to copy Erdoğan's palace. Although civil service salaries have been left unpaid for months due to lack of funds, the Barzanis are said to be in discussions with the company that constructed the Turkish presidential palace with a view to building a presidential palace in Erbil.

The United Nations

The United Nations is still appealed to as a source of hope, but can generally achieve very little. Last weekend, refugees from Turkey living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq held a sit-in outside the UN office in Slemani in protest against threats and attacks against them by Turkey – including Çelebi's murder – and they met and discussed with UN officials.

Last Sunday, a high-level UN delegation visited Al Hol camp in Syria, which houses ISIS families. They were accompanied by the Chief of the Iraqi Security Services, and they praised Iraq's repatriation of 2,451 of its citizens. They also stressed the urgent need for more repatriations, as the only durable

solution for this terrible and dangerous camp. Rojava Information Centre reports that there are still around 55,862 people in the camp, of whom 38,134 are children. 28,738 are Iraqis, 18,870 are Syrians, and 8,254 originate from 49 other countries.

Beyond governments

In asking who cares about the Kurds, it is important to look beyond governments and governmental organisations. In other news this week, an international peace delegation is visiting the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to draw attention to what is happening; another British trade union – the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union – has demonstrated support for the Freedom for Öcalan Campaign at its annual conference; the Spanish political party, Podemos, has put out a statement in support of the Kurds, calling on the EU to prevent further Turkish invasions and expressing solidarity with the HDP; and there are many demonstrations planned for today's Global Day of Action to Defend Kurdistan. All good things, and often involving some really dedicated work, but real change will require much more.

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