

# The Kurdistan Region of Iraq faces attacks from without and within – a weekly news review

Another week brings another round of bellicose statements from the Turkish government. And in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the KDP is preparing to help Turkey continue their de facto occupation in the north. The KDP-dominated Kurdistan Regional Government has long since come to the end of its term and is now without official recognition, but the KDP has manoeuvred to get the elections delayed a fourth time, allowing them to hang onto what power they have.

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Another week, another round of bellicose statements from the Turkish government. A week ago on Friday, Turkish Defence Minister, Yaşar Güler, told CNN Turk that Turkey's attacks on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq had moved on from periodic operations to continuous [action](#).

He also gave the old story that Turkey's attacks on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria are justified by self-defence – although the only threat the Administration poses for Turkey, is that of a good example – and he repeated the refuted claim that the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (the PUK, one of the Kurdistan region's two main parties) supports the PKK.

Last Sunday, Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, spoke to the Saudi news channel, Al Arabiya, about what Turkey expected from the Iraqi Government and Iraqi militias in the fight against the PKK. He [included](#) his "belief" that the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) were "willing to cleanse Sinjar of the PKK".

What he calls the PKK in Sinjar (or Şengal) are the Yazidi self-defence forces (Şengal Resistance Units, or YBŞ) that the PKK helped the Yazidis set up, but that are now an independent organisation. The PMUs are militia groups officially recognised by the Iraqi Government.

However, Fidan's statements appear to be largely bluff. While Turkey's President Erdoğan hoped to come back from Bagdad with a joint security agreement, all he has achieved so far, according to London-based Al-Arab, is an understanding to form a [committee](#) to study such an agreement.

And the main objection to cooperation with Turkey against the PKK comes from the PMUs. Many of the PMUs are represented politically by the Al-Fatah Alliance, which is part of the Coordination Framework (itself a loose coalition of Shiite parties and armed groups) that dominates Iraq's ruling coalition. The PMUs have had a tactical cooperation with the YBŞ, and have actively opposed the UN-backed Sinjar Agreement, which was made without consulting the people of Sinjar and would hand over control of the region to the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Many of the PMUs have Iranian links and do not want to see growing influence for Turkey, Iran's

regional rival. There is also a more general fear of getting involved in a new regional war.

On Tuesday, Voice of America published a report [entitled](#) “Turkey poised to step in as analysts warn of US pullout of Syria”. The reporter, Dorian Jones, concluded, in the upbeat tones ubiquitous in news reporting, “US collaboration with Syrian Kurdish Forces, considered by Ankara as terrorists, was the permanent thorn in bilateral ties [between Turkey and America]. With the expected pullout of American troops approaching, analysts say the talk between the two allies now is about increasing cooperation.”

### **Western interests**

The Americans are under pressure to leave Iraq and Syria, but have said that they have no plans for immediate withdrawal. However, we can be sure that whatever decision they take, it will be guided by strategic self-interest. The fate of the region’s Kurds will count for nothing. As to the fate of the Rojava experiment in creating a different sort of society built around community – for American and most other Western politicians, that will count for even less. The proponents of liberal democracy like to talk about freedom and choice, but have no qualms about restricting the freedom to choose another form of society that does not prioritise capitalism.

America and Europe see support for Turkey as in their own interests. They comply with Turkey’s demand to label the PKK as a terrorist organisation, and they sell Turkey advanced weapons. In his interview with CNN Turk, Turkey’s Defence Minister also expressed optimism about ongoing negotiations with Germany for Turkey to buy Eurofighter jets.

What is referred to as national self-interest should more properly be described as the short-term interests of national elites, and these rarely coincide with the interests of the people. While the need for an alternative to the current economic and political system is ever more obvious and urgent, our governments work to close any alternatives down.

## **Fools destroying hope**

This week, a Guardian poll of leading climate scientists [found](#) almost-universally terrifying predictions of a dystopian world. One scientist commented, “The world’s response to date is reprehensible – we live in an age of fools.”

The same fools at the head of our governments are giving support to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, and bringing us ever closer to a third world war.

The society that they are enabling Turkey to destroy in North and East Syria has been creating the tools that could bring an end to such destruction. True, achievements in the environmental realm are not as advanced as they should be – as a recent conference recognises and seeks to address with a recentring of environmental issues – but the wider emphasis on human need rather than capitalist growth is a prerequisite for an [ecological](#) society.

And the attempt to create a genuine inclusive democracy is our best hope for building a system that is geared towards the good of society and not of the military industrial complex.

## **KNK diplomacy**

Of course, these are hardly points that will carry much weight with our current politicians, but Kurds still undertake diplomatic meetings with those in power to attempt to counter the Turkish narrative with a Kurdish perspective and analysis. As well as emphasising the debt owed by the rest of the world to the people who lost 12,000 lives defeating the ISIS caliphate, they stress the need for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question that would allow Kurds to live in dignity in Turkey, and they call for an end to Turkish aggression in Iraq and Syria and the instability this brings to the whole region.

Recently, a delegation from the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) was in Washington, where KNK co-chair, Ahmet Karamus, [described](#) the atmosphere of their talks as warm and very positive.

American relations with Erdoğan may be chillier – his expected visit to Washington this week was cancelled – but the realpolitik of US power is still focussed on keeping Turkey on side.

The KNK's most recent statement, published last Saturday, is headlined "Don't Let Erdogan Start Another Regional War". They argue that "Erdogan's government remains uninterested in a political solution. As they have after past electoral setbacks in 2015 and 2019, they are choosing to escalate military operations against the Kurds in order to galvanise nationalist support and find pretexts to suppress all dissent." They claim that Turkey aims "to destroy the autonomous status of the Kurdistan Region and to secure Turkish control of strategic territory in northern Iraq, including important regions around Mosul and Kirkuk." And that Turkey is using the planned Development Road project as an excuse to expand their military activities even deeper into Iraq and to insist on implementation of the Sinjar Agreement. They also observe that "Erdogan is aiming for an intra-Kurdish conflict between the KDP, the PKK, and the PUK... [and] is counting on the active participation of the KDP in his efforts to occupy Kurdish territory in Iraq and crush Kurdish aspirations in Turkey."

### **The KDP**

The role being taken by the KDP is a source of both anger and concern. The Barzani family, which controls the party, has a long history of undermining other Kurdish groups and [working](#) with foreign interests to pursue their own power.

Today, they act as vassals of Turkey, and the KDP's peşmerga forces have been actively helping Turkey's attacks on the PKK and Turkey's military occupation of the northern mountains. Lekolin reports on plans by Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) and the KDP for the KDP's Zêrevanî gendarmes and Roj peşmerga. Under Turkish instruction, these will help [surround](#) the PKK guerrillas and block off access between North and East Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

## **Election manoeuvres**

The KDP is the dominant party in the Kurdistan Regional Government, but they are fearful that if Kurdistan government elections take place, as planned, on 10 June they will lose control. It seems that rampant corruption, unpaid salaries, lack of economic opportunities, increasing authoritarianism, and the prospect of fratricidal war are not very popular. The KDP have been manoeuvring to get the election postponed; and it appears that their plans have been successful. On Tuesday, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission suspended election preparations.

The elections were originally scheduled for 1 October 2022, seven months before the completion of the parliamentary term, and had already been [postponed](#) three times due to disputes between the region's two main parties – the KDP and the PUK – as to how they should be run.

But it was agreed that the existing government should be prolonged until the end of 2023. However, last May, the Federal Supreme Court ruled that continuing to govern without holding elections was unconstitutional and that any decisions made after the end of the last parliamentary session would be null and void. The region is now without an officially recognised government. In February, another decision by the Supreme Court ruled that since the regional government was not functioning, it could not organise an election, and this should be done instead by the Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq. The court further ruled that the constitution required that the region be divided into four constituencies rather than one, and – in response to a case filed by the PUK – that the eleven seats reserved for ethnic minorities were unconstitutional. The way the voting for the minority seats was organised meant that they had all become dominated by nominees of the KDP, ensuring that the KDP had an undemocratic advantage. On 3 March, the June election date was announced.

The KDP refused to accept the new rules, and declared a boycott of the elections. The PUK insisted that elections must take place as planned, but fears grew about what would happen if the KDP refused to hand over control or refused to facilitate voting in the areas that they control. The KDP had

objected to the interference of the Iraqi Federal Court in Kurdistan affairs, but they were ready to use the court to promote their own agenda. Masrour Barzani, Prime Minister of the now unofficial Kurdistan Regional Government, filed a court case claiming that the division of seats between the new constituencies was unconstitutional in being based on the number of voters rather than the population, and requested that the elections be [suspended](#) pending the result of this case. That request for suspension was accepted on Tuesday.

To add a further layer of complication, the legal mandate under which Iraq's High Electoral Commission can organise the regional election expires in the summer.

Both the KDP and the PUK have been [carrying](#) out international diplomacy to build external support for their positions. Nechirvan Barzani, the region's president, has been in Bagdad and Tehran, while the leader of the PUK, Bafal Talabani, has been to Washington.

It is hard to envisage how an election will be achievable in these circumstances, but, meanwhile, a government that has long since lost its legitimacy is aiding a foreign military to gain control of ever greater areas of what they celebrate as an autonomous region.

### **Iraqi refugees**

One indication of the difficulties of life in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, is the number of people from the region who have risked their lives to emigrate. Iraqi Kurds have frozen to death in the border wastelands between Belarus and Poland, and have drowned attempting to cross the English Channel. Now, migrants that make it to the UK face the additional danger of deportation to Rwanda. Already many people – including Kurds – have been detained in preparation for flights to Rwanda that the British Home Office claims will take off in eight to ten weeks. There have been [reports](#) of protests and a hunger strike, and there are fears that people will go [into](#) hiding and risk destitution and exploitation.

I end with the usual round up of attacks: physical, political, and judicial.

### **The Syrian Government blockade**

It is not just Turkey that is making life difficult for the people of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Government also [attempts](#) to destabilise what they have built. Firat News Agency has been talking with people in the autonomous Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah, which are separate from the rest of the Autonomous region and have been kept under an embargo by the Syrian Government since the invasion of Afrîn in 2018. The neighbourhoods are home to some 200,000 people, who are organised into assemblies and keep up their own self-defence. But, thanks to the blockade, medicines are not getting through to hospitals and pharmacies, and a lack of materials has stopped work in workshops and factories, leaving their 15,000 workers struggling to earn a living. Emîn Elîko, a member of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) General Assembly, explained, "Their acts are aimed at breaking the will of the neighbourhood residents. This mentality, which also tries to break the morale and motivation of the population, aims to shake confidence in the Autonomous Administration."

### **Turkish bombardment**

Turkish bombardment continues to disrupt life in North and East Syria. For weeks, Manbij has [come](#) under artillery attack nearly every day. Fields have been [burned](#) in the bombardments, and [others](#) have been deliberately set alight. A child was [injured](#) by a Turkish bomb.

### **In Turkey**

In Turkey itself, Gabar and Cudi Mountains have again been declared "Temporary Special Security Zones", with access [prohibited](#); 72 people have been [detained](#) in house raids carried out over ten provinces; and thirteen politicians have each been [sentenced](#) to six years three months in relation to the attempts at self-government in the Kurdish cities in 2015-16.

Sara Kaya, the former co-mayor of Nusaybin, who was arrested and replaced by a government appointed trustee in January 2017, finally completed her trial. She was given a ten-and-a-half-year sentence, but was released due to the time she had already spent in prison. She is still banned from leaving the country. Kaya did not attend her trial as she is one of the prisoners protesting the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. Their [current](#) action involves refusing contact with the outside world to replicate and draw attention to Öcalan's situation.

### **And trade with Israel**

Meanwhile, with the eyes of the world on Gaza, Turkey's relations with Israel have [continued](#) their history of hypocrisy. A month after Erdoğan's announcement that Turkey was banning the export of 54 items to Israel, and a week after he announced the banning of all trade – bans that were clearly a response to his party's haemorrhaging of votes to the New Welfare Party – Turkey's Minister of Trade informed construction industry factories that formerly exported to Israel that they have temporary permission to resume trade. And all the while, oil from Azerbaijan continues to be [shipped](#) to Israel via the Turkish port of Ceyhan.

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