

# Politics in a time of war – a weekly news review

[1:58 pm 12/03/2022](#)

A black and white portrait of Sarah Glynn, a woman with short dark hair, smiling. She is wearing a dark top with a white lace collar. The portrait is set against a light background and is partially enclosed by a red curved line.

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**SARAH GLYNN**  
*Medya News*

## Sarah Glynn

On Thursday foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine met for the first time since the war started. The meeting produced no recorded progress other than the fact that it took place at all. Still, it did take place – on the sidelines of the Anatolya Diplomatic Forum in the presence of the Turkish Foreign minister. De-escalation and negotiation are desperately needed for a situation where warmongering leaders seem ready to risk taking the world closer and closer to destruction, but it would be a bitter irony if those negotiations were able to be exploited to increase instability in the Middle East by boosting the power and prestige of Turkey.

The same Turkish Government that is putting itself forward as a mediator of peace has carried out its own unprovoked invasions into Syria where it continues to commit war crimes. These include attacks on civilians, targeting of vital infrastructure such as water supplies and ethnic cleansing. In Turkish-occupied Afrîn, which is run by Turkey's mercenary gangs, a human rights association has recorded sixty abductions in February alone. Many of these are kidnappings for ransom but abductions also drive away the existing population. In addition, the association's report documented the looting and destruction of archaeological sites. While Ukrainians are wrapping up their monuments in an attempt to protect them from invading Russian forces, fighters under Turkish control are deliberately erasing the important remnants of the ancient cultures of North and East Syria.

Another unlikely would-be peacemaker is Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, who last Saturday flew to Moscow for talks with President Putin. At the same time as Bennett talks about peace in Ukraine, his country continues its illegal occupation of Palestine and is increasingly recognised as operating an apartheid regime.

Both Turkey and Israel are hypocritically exploiting the situation in their own interests. And they share the same cynicism when it comes to relations with each other. This week the Israeli President Isaac Herzog came to Turkey for the first Israeli presidential visit in fourteen years. Despite President Erdoğan's self-portrayal as a defender of the Palestinians in opposition to Israel, Turkey and Israel have maintained good economic relations. Last year trade expanded by over a third and following Wednesday's meeting, Erdoğan's list cooperation building areas included their defence industries. Erdoğan told Herzog, "Turks and Jews have put forth the most beautiful examples of living together in peace throughout centuries. We will not let any shadow be cast on our exceptional history". While Jews fared much better under the Ottomans than in Europe, Erdoğan might be advised to watch the recent Netflix series, *The Club* (Kulüp). It enabled Turkish viewers to understand the devastating impact of the 1942 wealth tax that targeted non-Turks, such as the Jewish family of the show's main character.

Turkey is also looking at other ways that the war might be used to their advantage. Muhdan Saglam explains, in Al-Monitor, that Turkey could benefit from European nations looking for an alternative supply of gas through a pipeline via Turkey from Azerbaijan or Israel. This would not just bring economic benefits but would also enhance Turkey's status with western nations. Fehim Tastekin observes that Turkey is providing a welcoming environment for Russian oligarchs forced to relocate from places where they are now being sanctioned and that Turkey will compete for the oligarchs, their money with Israel and the UAE. But Tastekin also comments on the risks involved in Turkey's balancing act between NATO and Russia. He notes that "Kyiv's underscoring of the success of the Turkish drones has been widely seen as Ukraine's attempt to force Turkey to take an active pro-Ukrainian side in the war." And he suggests that Russia may try and take revenge at a later date when they no longer need Turkey's help.

Erdoğan rejects "actions akin to a witch-hunt against the Russian people, literature, students or artists", but similar actions against the Kurds are the daily fare of Turkey under his rule. Just this week, Cizre District Governor's Office cancelled, without reason, the performance planned for today of a play based on the classic Kurdish love story, Mem û Zîn.

The United Nations' World Food Programme warns that Russia and Ukraine are responsible for 30% of global wheat exports, 20% of corn, 80-85% of sunflower oil and that already high food prices will go even higher. This at a time when 17% of families in Turkey are already liable for debt enforcement proceedings and the minimum wage is below starvation level. Difficulties are increased by panic buying that last weekend saw shops emptied of sunflower oil. (The export of Turkish sunflower oil is now banned.)

The war in Ukraine has added further instability to already soaring energy costs. This is a world-wide problem, but particularly severe in Turkey where the fall in value of the lira has raised the cost of all imports. Escalating electricity costs even hit prisoners who are forced to pay for all personal needs including sanitary, cleaning products and electricity. Cartoonist Ahmet

Bilge told Bianet that the electricity bill for his shared cell rose in a month from 80 to 200 Lira.

In Syria there have been claims of fighters being recruited for both Ukraine and Russia though nothing is certain. There are allegations of recruitment organised by the Syrian regime, Russia and the Russian-linked security firm, Wagner. There are also Russian claims that fighters of Albanian and Caucasian origin are leaving Idlib to fight for Ukraine. Many mercenaries who have been fighting against Russian-backed regime forces in Syria are keen to be part of the action in Ukraine or otherwise to increase hostilities against Russian forces in Syria, while Russia is concentrating on the Ukrainian war.

Meanwhile, in a reminder that old wars have not gone away, news has come through that ISIS has appointed a new leader to replace the man who was killed in a raid by the United States over a month ago.

### **International Women's Day**

While ISIS continues its attempt to reduce women to chattels, the Kurds put women's equality at the centre of their freedom struggle. International Women's Day has become an important moment for celebration and struggle. Huge colourful and determined marches and rallies are held in Turkish cities and in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, where 8 March has been made a public holiday. The Kurdish women's movement is a radical movement that defines itself against liberal feminism. They don't simply want to change women's role in society but to change society itself. They want to eliminate toxic masculinity in personal relations and build a society based on solidarity and cooperation (values traditionally seen as feminine), in contrast to 'masculine' values of competition and dominance. LGBTI+ rights are included in their demands. As the statement read out at Istanbul's Feminist Night March put it, "The feminist revolt will not end without establishing an equal and free world where there is no patriarchy, capitalism, racism, wars, invasions, religious oppression, and labour exploitation!"

The Turkish state has no time for such views. They promote conservative 'family values', and last year, Turkey withdrew from the Istanbul Convention – the Council of Europe's convention on Violence against Women. While violence against women is high and rising, perpetrators are given an easy ride by the courts. The call to end femicide and violence against women was central to the protests; and the state responded with its own violence against the women protestors. In Istanbul, the marchers were again banned and blockaded from Taksim Square, and when some instead marched to Karaköy, they were met by police with pepper spray. In Diyarbakir, where women especially remembered Aysel Tuğluk and other ill prisoners and messages were read from imprisoned Kurdish politicians, women were searched at checkpoints and had to negotiate entry to the rally area. Women were prevented from marching in Elazığ, and the march in İzmir had to push through a police barricade. Across the country legal investigations were launched against 109 protestors.

### **More Oppression in Turkey**

From this week, yet another Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) MP faces being stripped of her political immunity so that she can be tried in court. The Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor's Office has prepared a summary of proceedings against Feleknaş Uca for "inciting people into hatred and animosity" through use of the words "Kurdistan" and "Kurdish cities".

Without a hint of irony, an academic who wrote his PhD thesis on the Rise of Authoritarian Populism in Turkey, has not only had his doctorate (awarded by the State University of New York) refused recognition in Turkey but now also faces prosecution for "insulting the President" and for "terrorism".

Three separate articles from Fırat News Agency show this authoritarianism in action through the rule of the government-imposed trustee who replaced the elected HDP mayor of Van.

Some 300 workers who were found to have been unlawfully dismissed from their work for the municipality in 2018, have still not been reinstated. In their

desperate struggle to survive, many have had to move elsewhere and a father of four gave up hope and killed himself.

SADAT, a military consultancy with close ties to the Turkish police and army, has been increasing its activities. This includes recruiting unemployed young men to work for them, and against the Kurdish movement.

Finally, the disdain with which the trustee municipality treats its citizens is evidenced by the dangerous build-up of uncollected garbage, which is generating fears of disease.

### **Kiliçdaroğlu in Diyarbakir**

Meanwhile, Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu, leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), has taken his message of reconciliation to the Kurdish 'capital' of Diyarbakir, a place that he admits the CHP had neglected, and has made a clear promise to solve the Kurdish problem through a reconciliation commission in the Turkish parliament, involving people from all parties and none in a transparent process. This puts Kiliçdaroğlu in a much more radical position than the six-party opposition block that the CHP heads, whose 28 February memorandum of aims didn't even mention the Kurds and therein lies his problem. He is not only allied with the far-right nationalist Good Party (İYİ), but must also contend with a strong ethnic-nationalist element within his own party. This week the CHP-run municipality of Bolu (which earlier made headlines through anti-immigrant laws ruled illegal by the Turkish state) hounded a municipal employee into resigning her job for sharing an image of the HDP's imprisoned co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş. Cleaning worker, Mahire Yentür, has been ostracised by friends and colleagues as a "terrorist".

Kiliçdaroğlu supports Demirtaş' release, which has been clearly demanded by the European Court of Human Rights – indeed the joint opposition memorandum includes implementing the court's decisions. The memorandum also states that elected politicians should not be replaced by trustees. Kiliçdaroğlu adds that political parties should not be closed, stating that "we have to respect everyone's lifestyle". He met with important critics of

the government, including the widow of murdered lawyer Tahir Elçi, and he promised to ensure people will live in tranquillity in Turkey and the whole region. However, he was careful not to step too far out of line. He began his visit by meeting the mothers who protest outside the HDP's office (with encouragement and help from the government), on the pretence that the HDP has "kidnapped" their children to join the PKK. When young Kurds asked him to comment on the fact that Abdullah Öcalan has been allowed no contact with the world outside his prison for a year, and about the deaths and rights violations in Turkish prisons, he sidestepped their questions.

### **In Iraq**

Over the border, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, government employees are yet again having to survive without payment of their salaries. This has been an ongoing problem since early 2020 and last weekend workers in several places announced a strike after two months without pay. Despite rising oil prices, the government claims shortage of money but is accused of corruption. Politics both between and within the main parties in the region is mired in rivalry and intrigue.

### **In Europe**

In Europe, there have been reports of two campaigns for Kurdish language teachers who are being prosecuted in Iran. A young Kurd in Germany has launched a petition to Amnesty International calling on them to help free his father, Keyûmerz Latifi, who was imprisoned by the Iranian intelligence services three weeks ago. Latifi has taught Kurdish language for over twelve years and is an activist for civil rights and Kurdish culture. No specific reason has been given for his arrest but he has previously been held in custody for three months. His three sisters have reported threats of sexual assault and one had her home raided, while his son explains that the family's bank accounts have been frozen and he has received death threats on his phone.

The case of Zara Mohammadi, who recently began a five-year prison sentence for teaching Kurdish, was raised by the Socialist Party in the Swiss parliament.

Their motion stressed that four official languages are spoken in Switzerland and called on the Swiss government to put pressure on Iran to allow ethnic minorities to receive education in their mother tongue.

Yesterday saw the start of the trial for the attempted assassination in Brussels of two leading Kurds, which I wrote about last week. The verdict will be given on 22 April.

Elsewhere in Europe the warmth being shown towards Ukrainian refugees continues to contrast with the cruel and illegal treatment meted out to refugees from other countries. Migrants are still trapped, cold and hungry, at the Belarus Polish border where this winter several died of exposure.

Denmark receives grateful refugees from Ukraine while revoking the residency permissions granted to refugees from Syria, despite the fact that the UN does not consider Syria safe for people to return to. They cannot actually deport the refugees, but the Syrians are held in detention centres.

None of this stops the Kurds from planning for a better future. Last weekend Kurdish activists, academics, rights organisations, and politicians met in Berlin for the second Democracy and Freedom Conference to discuss what is happening in Turkey – and what to do about it. Celebrations have already begun for Newroz, the Kurdish festival of resistance that takes place on the spring equinox, with organisers promising to “magnify the spirit of women’s resistance that emerged on March 8 with the spirit of freedom in Newroz and lead it to victory.”