

When Turkey attacks South Kurdistan they attack freedom and democracy – a weekly news review

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[1:57 pm 13/02/2021](#)



In the small hours of Tuesday morning, Turkish troops invaded the Garê mountains in northern Iraq, and the world didn't even blink. For international diplomats specialising in this area, the attack will be filed under "war against terror". Turkey's target was the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerrillas who

have been based in the Iraqi mountains since the 1980s – before the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (or South Kurdistan) gained its own autonomy. Turkey has labelled them terrorists, and the United States and European Union have accommodated their NATO ally and put the PKK on their own terrorist lists. Never mind that, as the Belgian courts concluded last year, the relationship between the PKK and the Turkish state would be more accurately described as a war. Or that the Turkish state has repeatedly shown that they will allow no space for Kurds to fight for their rights through political channels.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government in South Kurdistan, has proved itself ready to dismiss the PKK as terrorists too, even though the KDP, together with the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), only won regional autonomy themselves through guerrilla action; and despite the fact that they had to rely on PKK fighters to save the region from ISIS.

The KDP depends on links with Turkey to strengthen its position within Iraqi politics, and finds itself, in exchange, supporting Turkey's agenda. With the KDP's help, Turkey now controls large areas within the Iraqi border. Reports of this latest attack claim that it came from the south (Kurdish) side, and not from Turkey to the north.

This week, bombs were followed by helicopters bringing Turkish troops, but, often, the mountain areas are just subjected to bombing. Many of these bombs don't fall on the PKK guerrillas, but instead terrorise the local villagers. Turkey and the KDP try to exploit this by attempting to put the blame on the PKK, without whose presence, they say, Turkey would not be attacking.

Many Kurds – including all the other South Kurdistan parties – are very concerned about these attacks. They fear that Turkey is pushing the region into an intra-Kurdish civil war that will benefit only Turkey at the expense of all Kurds. Turkey has made no secret about its ambitions to take control of a large part of north Iraq. And any weakening of the PKK would affect Kurdish resistance everywhere. These attacks cannot be looked at in isolation from Turkey's ongoing low-level attacks on the Kurds in Ain Issa and other parts of

Syria, and on Kurdish villages within Turkey's borders, or their threats of a major assault on Derik (in Syria) or Şengal (Sinjar, in Iraq).

The KDP is also party to the US-brokered agreement that gifts the Yazidi region of Şengal to the KDP and the Iraq Federal Government. The Yazidis were not consulted in this arrangement, and do not want to give up their own self-defence forces, or hand control to the people who abandoned them to ISIS. Masrour Barzani, the KDP Prime Minister of South Kurdistan, has tweeted a complaint that "Forces that were supposed to withdraw remain in the area". Again, this plays into the hands of Turkey, who equate the Yazidi YBS with the PKK and YPG so as to see them and Şengal as another "legitimate" target for Turkish invasion.

At the same time, the Kurdistan Regional Government continues to pursue an authoritarian path in its approach to the region's internal critics. Since August, over 75 political activists and journalists have been detained in Duhok province. There is evidence of the use of torture to obtain "confessions", and detainees' families were prevented from protesting outside the UN office in Erbil. On Wednesday, Masrour Barzani appeared to take a leaf from Erdogan's book when he denounced those detained as spies.

Governments that are losing support may pick on others to blame for their failings, and the KDP has followed Turkey's lead in blaming the PKK. For the Turkish Government itself, the Kurds are the perpetual scapegoat, and external aggression provides a distraction from internal difficulties. Besides serving its imperial ambitions, war provides a banner that Turkish citizens can rally around, and helps silence opposition critics.

The Turkish government is not short of internal problems: a troubled economy, declining polling figures, and protests that have the potential to unite many different struggles against government oppression into a mass popular movement. Their response to protests against the imposition of a political appointee as rector of Boğaziçi University has only provided further reason for protest. And now they have announced new plans for axing university departments and setting up further ones stuffed with their supporters. In case of any doubt about the nature of the appointed rector,

footage from a 2019 TV programme has recently been recirculated. In this interview, made before Turkey's unprovoked occupation of Serê Kaniyê in NE Syria, Melih Bolu talks about using the attack to test Turkey's new weapons, and claims "We will arrest everyone who is there, whether dead or alive".

The government crackdown on the protestors has provoked criticism from the UN, the US and the EU, though we could be waiting a long time to see more than fine words and virtue signalling. And even these criticisms can be highly selective.

In America, human rights have come back into political parlance. They are something that the Biden administration likes to talk about, and a very mixed bag of senators from both US parties has put out a public letter to President Biden calling on him to press Turkey, as an important ally, to improve its human rights record. However, the brief statement put out by the US State Department on Wednesday gives cause for concern. Last year, the European Court of Human Rights passed important judgements against Turkey for unlawful imprisonment of both the businessman/financier Osman Kavala, and the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş. The statement only refers to Kavala, and a US citizen on trial in the same case. In failing to mention Demirtaş, or any of the other imprisoned HDP MPs, or the massive attack on democratic representation that their imprisonment signifies, the Biden administration is sending out a very alarming message that urgently needs to be rectified.

The PKK took up arms because there was no route whereby they could make the case for Kurdish rights through political means. Yet, so far, the US has also abstained from demanding that Turkey allows a democratic route, and from showing vital support for the HDP politicians and activists who have come under sustained attack from President Erdoğan and his government.

In an informative analysis for Green Left on the importance of the attacks on Garê, Marcel Cartier points out that Biden's new Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, exemplifies America's instrumentalist approach to the Kurds and unwavering support for Turkey's attempts to annihilate the PKK. Quoting from Blinken's 2017 Op-Ed in the New York Times, Cartier observes that "Blinken

signalled in 2017 that he is onboard with precisely what Turkey is attempting to move forward with now: an enlarged war against the PKK, coupled with an attempt to geographically separate the progressive Kurdish forces that are ideologically aligned”.

Turkey is now suggesting that they could limit their use of their Russia air defence system, whose purchase so angered the US, on the condition that the US stop working with the YPG. We are yet to see the US response to this.

As we note time and again, self-interested support for Turkey is not restricted to the US. It is particularly strong in Germany, which has a disproportionate influence on the EU more generally, and there have also been worrying developments in other European countries, particularly in hassling and deporting Kurdish asylum seekers. In the UK, which recently celebrated a new UK-Turkey Free Trade Agreement, the announcement of the appointment of (notoriously pro-Turkey) John Woodcock as leader of a government review into the “extreme left and right”, has set alarm bells ringing for UK Kurds and their friends, especially those who have fought with the YPG.

If Turkey’s attacks on the Kurds were really about preserving Turkish security, as Erdoğan claims and as his international friends like to parrot, then the solution would lie in reviving peace negotiations with the PKK, and investing in these with serious commitment. In any case, a peace agreement is a prerequisite for genuine democracy and freedom. Abdullah Ocalan has been ready to talk peace for a very long time, but he needs a serious partner from the Turkish side. Rather than backing Turkish claims that the PKK presents an existential threat, international powers should be pushing for peace negotiations.

In so many countries, and on so many subjects, governments are moving further away from the views of their citizens; but it is with those citizens who still retain a conscience that hope lies. As we approach the anniversary of Ocalan’s capture by an international conspiracy on 15 February 1999, people across the world are organising solidarity activities. In other years, the central event of this commemoration has been a long march of internationalists, culminating at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The

pandemic has curtailed this event, but also prompted activists to experiment with new organising methods, which may be able to reach different people. These include online discussions, of course, but also mobile libraries bringing information about the Kurdish freedom movement to different places.

As activists, we can often be so busy responding to the latest outrage that we fail to analyse our tactics and strategy, and so fail to make the best use of our limited resources. The current disruption to our usual activities can prompt us to make that much-needed analysis. We have observed that our politicians are motivated by self-interest, so we need to make it in their interests to act better – to remove the PKK from the terrorism list, for example, and to support demands for peaceful negotiation.

Progressive change is not graciously handed down from above but is a response to pressure from below that has become so great that it cannot be ignored. This is true internationally too, as the campaign against apartheid demonstrated. Kurdish “diplomacy” needs to reach out beyond career diplomats and politicians, to reach the people who they are supposed to represent. There is no short cut to building effective pressure. It is a hard slog, and our energies need to be well directed. We have to rely on the old triumvirate, educate, agitate, organise.

Meeting together is important for mutual support and for developing our ideas and knowledge – and the restrictions on the long march have deprived many activists of an opportunity for revitalisation and development; but, crucially, we also need to take ideas and knowledge beyond existing circles made up of Kurdish communities and their friends. We can demonstrate that solidarity is a two-way street, and that the Kurdish movement provides vital lessons and inspiration for progressive movements everywhere. There have been developments here; Firat News Agency records a steady stream of organisations signing up to the international campaign demanding Ocalan’s freedom – but there needs to be a torrent.

Covid-19, the climate emergency, and the murderous death throes of late capitalism have left many people looking for change. When people learn about the Kurdish freedom movement, their response is overwhelmingly positive.

But much more needs to be done to inform people of what is happening. And we should not be afraid to point out that the attack on Garê is an attack on all Kurds and on the wider movement for freedom and democracy of which they form such a vital part. Let's make sure this weekend's protests against this attack are known well beyond the Kurdish community.