

“Die here or go to Poland” – a weekly news review

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When countries respond to refugees and migrants by treating them as invaders, it is, perhaps, only a matter of time before their rivals seize on the situation and seek to force a migrant ‘invasion’. For the politicians, the migrants themselves are simply pawns. Their hopes and fears – even their lives – become mere grist to the political mill.

Turkey has played this callous political game for some years, putting pressure on Europe by repeatedly threatening to send refugees into the European Union. Now it is Belarus’s turn. For Turkey, this has proved a very effective method for keeping European criticism in check. The EU hands over billions of

Euros for refugee support, and, instead of criticising Turkey for their aggressive foreign policy – which results in many more refugees – European countries shower them with praise for accommodating the people that Europe refuses to take in.

For Lukashenko, the dictatorial leader of Belarus, orchestrating a migrant ‘invasion’ is his response to EU sanctions that were imposed after his brutal crushing of opposition protests. In fact, he even warned, last spring, that he would do this.

Turkey transported Syrian refugees to the Greek border, but these refugees had made their own way into Turkey. The Belarusian president, in contrast, has been accused of actively facilitating the transport of thousands of people to Minsk, as well as forcing them to attempt to cross over the border into Poland. Poland has responded by strengthening its border defences and – illegally – pushing back those who get through. For weeks now, families have been trapped in makeshift camps in the border forests with dwindling supplies of food and water and facing plummeting temperatures, but in recent days, as the numbers have massively increased, the horror of what is happening has erupted into the international media. Already, there are at least eight reported deaths, but others will have slipped away, out of sight in the frozen borderlands. While the trapped migrants come from many countries, the greatest number are believed to be Kurdish. Some have escaped war-torn Syria, but most seem to be from the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

An interview with a local volunteer who has been helping some of the migrants who have managed to cross into Poland provides a heart-rending account. “Water is the biggest problem”, he told OKO Press, “they have stomach problems and dehydration due to lack of clean water... This enormous suffering is like war... but everything is happening so quietly that part of society is trying to deny that it is happening at all.” And he explained, “Many of them want to go home. But there is no such option. You are beaten, you are pushed onto the wires, if you do not take steps towards Poland yourself.” A Syrian Kurd told Lydia Gall from Human Rights Watch how a

Belarusian border guard had made his options plain: “Die here or go to Poland.”

Tricks played by the Belarusians are alleged to have included erecting a fake border fence with large holes cut in it and filming people passing through to give the impression that crossing the border was easy.

On Monday, refugees from Iraq organised a march to try and alert the world to what was happening. When the Belarusian authorities learnt about their plans, they used the march to lure and transport thousands of migrants to an area that was heavy with Polish border guards, backed by the Polish police and army. They then used their own Belarusian forces to block the migrants’ return and trap them in the freezing forest.

The volunteer I quoted earlier described some of the people he helped, including a Kurdish academic: “Soran, a university lecturer – had to flee because he is not paid for his work. ‘My name sounds like one of our Kurdish languages – Sorani. A proud name like a language.’ And Soran faints from dehydration because he hasn’t drunk water in five days.”

That people from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq should be taking such risks to escape is a terrible indictment of the situation in the region, where many have given up hope of a decent life. A correspondent for the Moscow Times spoke to young Kurdish men on the flight from Istanbul to Minsk. “I have no choice, life is dangerous and hopeless in Iraq. I am ready for the crossing,” an 18-year-old told him. “It’s going to be shit, I know, I know. I have seen the videos,” another man said, but “I am not afraid. I have no life in Iraq. No work, no future, no money. Europe is where I want to be. Germany I hope”.

Meanwhile, Kurdistan Watch have shared a video of migrants from the Kurdistan Region who are now in France’s Dunkirk ‘Jungle’ hoping to cross the Channel into the UK. They speak of the ‘miserable life in Kurdistan’ for those not tied to one of the ruling parties.

The representative in Poland of the Kurdistan Regional Government, which is dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, has accused the migrants of lying to the authorities and of justifying their emigration with accounts that are “inaccurate and unfair.”

The operation to bring the migrants to Belarus involves a great many different organisations – travel agencies, airlines, and diplomats who issue visas. Enabling people to get to Belarus is not intrinsically problematic so long as they are not given false promises that this will provide a gateway into the EU – but the reason underlying most people’s journeys does not have to be spelt out. Many of the organisations involved are there because there are large amounts of money to be made, but there are political considerations too. Turkey’s national airline has been implicated and is one of the airlines that faces possible blacklisting by the European Union. President Erdoğan has shown support for Lukashenko before, when Turkey forced NATO to weaken their response to Belarus’s state hijacking of a plane containing a Belarusian dissident. Turkey’s support for the Belarusian leader plays well with Russia – though it will damage relations with Poland, which had only recently bought Turkish drones. Russia is clearly enjoying the EU’s discomfort, and the Russian foreign minister suggested that the EU could give financial assistance to Belarus for controlling the migrants – quoting the example of the EU’s refugee deal with Turkey.

The response from other EU countries has concentrated on the need to maintain border security, and has shown little concern for the people suffering on the other side of the wire, or for Poland’s failure to comply with asylum rules. This rejection of humanity is reflected in the attitude of many European citizens, as evidenced in the xenophobic comments on Twitter. Many Poles are concerned at how their politicians are using the situation to bolster far-right nationalism; and for bellicose politicians on both sides of the border this is a chance to blow their military trumpets. Poland’s former prime minister has called for help from NATO. The EU’s focus is on more sanctions – sanctions on Belarus representatives and on the airlines facilitating the migration. In response to EU pressure, Iraq had already suspended flights to Belarus in August. Now, Turkish Airlines and Belarus’s Belavia have said they

will not carry any Iraqi, Syrian or Yemeni nationals on flights from Istanbul to Minsk.

Turkey enjoys praise for taking in an unmatched number of refugees, and relishes comparison with European hostility, but people rarely ask how many refugees Turkey's foreign wars have themselves created. And refugees in Turkey are also resented and attacked. Syrian refugees are currently being deported for posting pictures of themselves eating bananas on social media in response to a racist diatribe against another Syrian refugee who, among other things, was attacked for being able to afford bananas. A particularly vindictive example has been set by the Mayor of Bolu, a member of the main opposition – and nominally social-democratic – Republican People's Party. He has now announced plans for charging foreigners twenty times the normal fee for a marriage to make it difficult for them to get married in his city.

Europe's attitude towards refugees was illustrated by an article published this week by British journalist, Matt Broomfield. He describes being held for two months in refugee detention centres in Greece and then being deported back to England with a ten-year ban on travel to the Schengen Area, all on the request of the German government. He presumes that the request for his detention and ban originated in Turkey, and that it is a response to his having worked for three years in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, where he helped establish the Rojava Information Centre. Broomfield writes: "My case provided a window into the violence, squalor and farce of day-to-day life in the EU's detention-deportation machine. But it also illustrates the complicity of European states and the Erdoğan regime in suppressing journalistic freedom, political dissent, and democratic movements."

Turkey's own legal system has reached a new low. Last week, the Council of Judges and Prosecutors removed the presiding judge in the Kobanê Case, in which 108 people – members and supporters of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – face life imprisonment without parole. The official reason given for his removal was altered before settling on a Covid infection. The HDP's defence lawyers have declared the dismissal and the appointment of a

replacement judge as unconstitutional and against judicial independence; and they have refused to take part in the case and so give it a semblance of credibility. This is a difficult decision to make, as political court cases provide a continuing public platform, but it sends a clear one-off message about the destruction of judicial interference.

President Erdoğan shows his contempt for judicial independence whenever he speaks of the HDP. Although the HDP is currently fighting a court case that calls for its closure, and such discussion could be considered sub-judice, this week he publicly called them the puppet of the proscribed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The lengths that the Turkish state will go to in its pursuit of the HDP was demonstrated on Thursday, when Başak Demirtaş, wife of the party's imprisoned co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, was given a two-and-a-half year prison sentence. The state must have been desperate to pin something on her, but all they could find was an incorrect date on a medical form that she had submitted six years ago to secure unpaid leave from her teaching job when she was having complications following a miscarriage. She hadn't even made the error herself. This sentence, which is being appealed, not only punishes Başak; it also further punishes her two daughters, who have already had to learn to grow up without their father. And, in the words of the EU Rapporteur for Turkey, Nacho Sánchez Amor, "It gives the measure of the worrying state of Turkish judiciary."

Just as the actions of politicians encourage xenophobia and attacks on immigrants, so the state's actions towards the HDP encourage attacks by the wider population. It is sadly no surprise to learn that Molotov cocktails were thrown at the party's Diyarbakir office on the night of the 7-8 November.

State actions we can't see are even worse. Turkey has been discussing last week's interview with Mehmet Eymür, former head of counter terrorism in the Turkish intelligence service, in which he confessed to the state's systemic use of torture. When asked if these methods are still practised, he claimed that today's methods are more severe, and sometimes fatal.

As President Erdoğan watches his support dwindle and the Turkish Lira sink past the ten to a dollar mark, many people are wondering what he might do – at home or abroad – to cling onto power.

Meanwhile, the people of North and East Syria continue to live under the threat of another major Turkish attack (which would create more refugees). Turkish drones have been hovering over Kobanê and Qamişlo, contributing to the sense of uncertainty, and, on Tuesday, another lethal drone attack killed Yusuf Gulo and his two grandsons when it hit their car in Qamişlo. Yusuf and the whole Gulo family have played a prominent role in the Kurdish freedom struggle. Residents have evacuated front-line villages, and local people tending their farms have become targets for Turkey's mercenary snipers. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have accused Turkey of trying to provoke them, and the Syrian Democratic Council responded to the drone attack with another call for the 'international community' to close the air space.

In a wide-ranging interview with Amberin Zaman for Al-Monitor, the SDF's Commander in Chief, Mazloum Abdi, explained that Turkey would need approval from either the US or Russia to attack, and that both had made clear that this would not be acceptable. Russia had raised the possibility of Turkey's mercenary groups taking the initiative themselves, but he didn't think that likely. However, they have to take all threats seriously.

Zaman observed, "It's no secret that the Biden administration wants you to come to an agreement with the regime through Russian mediation." Abdi commented that the problem cannot be solved without Russia, but that, at the moment, although there have been contacts with Damascus, the Assad regime has not shown themselves ready to move beyond their 2011 mentality. He also hinted at the possibility of independent negotiations for the future of the Arab-majority lands that the SDF liberated from ISIS.

As he has done before, Abdi stressed that the area's economic difficulties threaten support for the Autonomous Administration and leave people more vulnerable to ISIS recruitment. (Every difficulty also acts as a push for emigration.) External factors impacting the region include the uncertainty

generated by Turkey's constant threats and ongoing low-level attacks; drought, which has been exacerbated by Turkey's deliberate holding back of much of Syria's share of river water; and the US sanctions against Syria stipulated in the Caesar Act. Abdi wants sanctions lifted from North and East Syria, and also suggests that the wider sanctions could be used to help lever solutions for Syria's future. He explains that "Bolstering the economy has become one of the pillars of combatting terrorism."

While the US and Europe continue to give uncritical support to the Kurdistan Regional Government and to regard the KRG as their friend in the region, there is no official recognition given to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Abdi argues that foreign powers need to engage with the Administration on more than a military level, and that this strengthening of support should be seen as part of the fight against ISIS.

The Rojava Information Centre's most recent report on ISIS activity notes that the number of attacks remains steady, after an earlier fall, but that the attacks (all in Deir ez-Zor) included "assassinations of civilians, including a doctor shot inside a hospital while on duty, and tribal leaders". They record that "Raids this month on ISIS affiliates also brought to light links with Turkish intelligence – a pattern that suggests blurred lines between the groups." On Monday, we learnt that North and East Syria's internal security forces had foiled a planned attack and jail-break at a detention centre for ISIS prisoners in Hasakah.

ISIS is active in Iraq, too, and especially in the "disputed territories" that are contested between the KRG and the federal government. This, together with Turkey's ongoing bombing of the northern mountains, adds to the pressures pushing people to try their luck at the Polish border.

Thursday's anniversary of the end of the First World War provided another reminder of how little we have learnt from the war that was supposed to end all wars and that sowed the seeds of many of today's conflicts. Wilfred Owen's anti-war poem, Dulce Et Decorum Est, also provides a graphic reminder of why the world has outlawed chemical weapons. We are still waiting for international authorities to respond to calls to investigate Turkey's

reported use of chemical weapons against the PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.