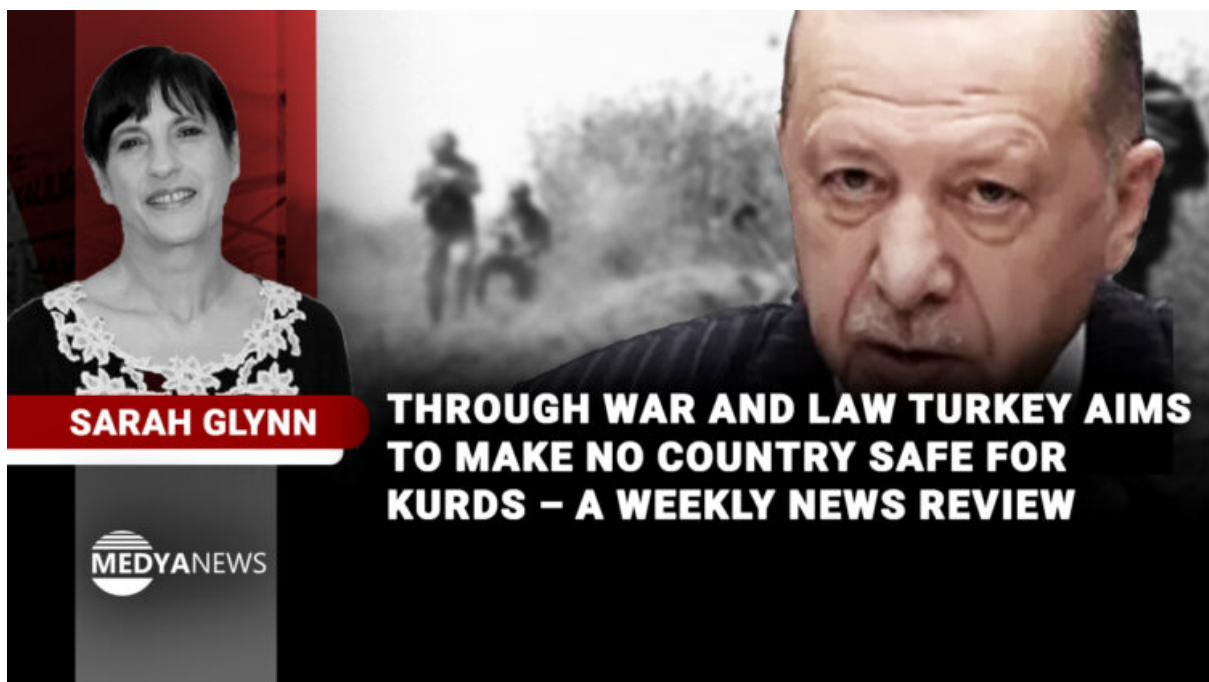


# Through war and law Turkey aims to make no country safe for Kurds – a weekly news review

Turkey is preparing to invade northern Iraq and northern Syria, and the “international community” remains silent. This week’s review focuses on Turkish plans for Iraq, where the Development Road Project may be used as an excuse to destroy autonomous administration in Makhmour and Şengal; on fears of Turkish invasion and ISIS revival in North and East Syria; and on the growing criminalisation of Kurds in Europe, where international power games are trumping basic rights and freedoms.

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Sarah Glynn

For a long time, there has been talk of attacks after Ramadan. Eid al-Fitr, the holiday that ends the Ramadan fast, was celebrated on Wednesday.

In full public view, Turkey is preparing to invade northern Iraq and northern Syria, and the international community (so called) has made no reaction. But this should come as no surprise. When the claims of Western governments to protect “democratic values” amount to nothing while the world cries out for an end to Israel’s genocidal attack on Gaza, those governments will hardly be moved by Turkish attacks and persecution that have barely been noticed by a wider public.

As in the case of Gaza, Western governments are not merely doing nothing, they are aiding and abetting Turkey’s attacks. With respect to both Israel and Turkey, they can be accused of supplying weapons that will be used in the slaughter, of seeking to legitimise the aggression, and of using their own legal systems to delegitimise and suppress resistance.

Today’s global rise of the far-right is often compared to the situation in the 1930s, but there are also disturbing parallels to be made with the period before the First World War, when different powers were competing for control over large parts of the planet. The First World War brought the end of the Ottoman Empire, though not before the genocide of the Armenians. President Erdoğan’s Turkish state wants to reclaim the lost power and prestige of the Ottoman Empire, including control over the non-Arab regions of Iraq and Syria, which Turkey claimed in the Misak-ı Milli, the National Pact of 1920, and which are the areas where Kurds are in a majority.

### **The Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

Erdoğan is expected to visit Iraq for talks this month with the aim of getting Iraqi [support](#) for his plans. Turkish pro-government news sources have been talking up preparations for the planned attack and plans for Iraqi participation.

While Iraq can hardly welcome the prospect of effectively allowing a further Turkish invasion, Turkey has several cards with which to threaten or persuade them. They have power over how much water reaches Iraq in the Tigris and

the Euphrates, and over how much Iraqi oil is exported through the Turkish port of Ceyhan; and they want to work with Iraq on building a new road and rail trade route across the country. The Development Road Project is planned to link the Persian gulf to Europe, competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative to the north, and with the planned India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor that would go through Israel.

Iraq's Development Road – in fact parallel road and railway – is designed to start in the Grand Faw Port, a massive complex being constructed on the Persian Gulf south of Basra, and to run up through Iraq, via Bagdad, into Turkey, controversially excluding the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from the promised economic development. Turkey insists that for the security of the route, and also for it to attract investment, a wide strip either side of the northern Iraqi section, which passes through PKK dominated areas, must be cleared of PKK guerrillas. The clearance demanded also encompasses two regions that currently organise themselves autonomously according to the democratic ideas of Abdullah Öcalan: Makhmour Refugee Camp, and the Yazidi area of Şengal. Indeed, the possibility of using the Development Road as an excuse to clamp down on these two regions doubtless influenced the choice of route. The Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) believes that Turkey plans to test Iraq's commitment to taking on the PKK by demanding that they take control of these areas first. The KNK has [issued](#) a statement warning of Turkey's plans for northern Iraq in which they implore Iraq not to become Turkey's pawn.

However, Kurdish guerrillas are only one of the things standing in the way of this project, which is [calculated](#) to need \$17 billion in investments. Endemic corruption, political instability, and competition from other routes will all discourage potential investors.

As Turkey has taken control over widening areas of northern Iraq, they have portrayed their invasions as defensive strikes against the PKK, giving the impression that if the PKK were removed, they would be the best of peaceful neighbours. But this contradicts statements (complete with maps) about the salience of the Misak-ı Millî, and runs counter to Turkey's general revanchism, which is combined with aggressive interference in other regional states. As

demonstrated in Turkish-occupied Syria, land occupied by Turkey may be handed over to violent “jihadi” militias and become a sanctuary for ISIS cells, which can hardly be the future that the Iraqi government would wish to see. In 2014, the PKK played a major part in recapturing the Town of Makhmour from ISIS and stopping the ISIS advance on Erbil. In resisting the Turkish invaders, the PKK are still protecting Iraq from ISIS and similar destructive groups.

### **North and East Syria**

From the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the spokesperson for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Farhad Shami, has told Sulaymaniyah-based Channel 8 that they have information that Turkey plans to carry out a ground attack this summer in the area that contains the city of Kobanê, which is now sandwiched between the Turkish occupied areas of Jarablus and Girê Spî. From the Turkish perspective, an [attack](#) here would have both strategic and symbolic significance.

Turkey has recently carried out devastating bombardments of North and East Syria’s infrastructure and oil refineries, and they have never stopped their low-level attacks. The region is also under attack from Iran-backed militias linked to the Syrian government, and from ISIS. Shami observed that ISIS attacks have always increased during Ramadan, but that ISIS have also benefitted from the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Russia’s Wagner Group, as have the Iranian militias.

The SDF commander, Mazloun Abdi, told Amberin Zaman for Al-Monitor, “I believe that the conditions for an ISIS resurgence that would restore it to its former strength continue to exist. They still have a vast financial network. They also enjoy popular support in this region and beyond; In the detention camps here in al-Hol, in Roj, new generations of even more radical ISIS militants, boys and girls, are maturing and planning their escape. The conflict in Gaza has also boosted Daesh [ISIS]. It is distracting the anti-Daesh coalition and their focus on this region has [diminished](#) as a result.”

When asked what the US-led coalition could do to prevent an ISIS resurgence, Abdi responded that the Autonomous Administration needed to be officially

recognised; also that it needed financial support to avert grave economic crisis, but funds were actually shrinking. He again noted that “the regions under Turkish occupation in northern Syria – Tell Abyad, Azaz, and Idlib... provide a safe haven for Daesh”.

When asked specifically about the lack of coalition help for rebuilding after Turkey’s recent attacks, Abdi commented, “It’s related to their national policies and they say that these policies do not permit them to help us. It may be that they are scared of upsetting Turkey. Of course, all of this is compounded by the sanctions imposed by Western governments on the Syrian regime and the scaling down of donor aid. The [World Health Organisation]’s announcement that it would no longer be funding projects in Syria was a huge blow to us.”

### **The Zangezur Corridor**

All this is taking place amidst a much bigger international competition for regional power and dominance and control over trade routes. This is [exemplified](#), not only by the fallout from the war in Ukraine and assault on Gaza, but also by the combination of diplomacy and military threats around the Zangezur Corridor. This refers to the strip of Armenia next to the Iranian border that Azerbaijan wants to take over and use to link the main part of Azerbaijan with the autonomous Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan and on to Turkey. Iran has no love for Azerbaijan, but has agreed an alternative route on the Iranian side of the border, which would retain Iranian access to Armenia and give Iran greater political leverage.

Iran and Turkey are fierce rivals, but they can cooperate together when they feel it is their interests to do so. This plan provides a reprieve for Armenia, but cooperation between Iran and Turkey can be a source of worry for the Kurds, who are persecuted by both.

### **Lawfare in Europe**

In Iraq and Syria, Turkey attacks Kurdish lives and achievements with brute force. And for Kurds committed to working for a better Kurdish future, Turkey aims to make sure that nowhere is safe for them, not even Europe. European

governments have shown themselves remarkably ready to comply with Turkish demands; though, when we remember that Abdullah Öcalan himself was delivered by international governments to a Turkish state that (in 1999) still operated the death penalty, we perhaps should not be surprised. This complicity with Turkey is manifested within European states themselves through a politicisation of the justice system that both turns a blind eye towards Turkish aggressions and criminalises Kurdish activists.

The most blatant example of turning a blind eye is the failure of the French authorities to carry out a full investigation into the murder of three high profile Kurdish women activists in Paris in 2013, which is generally held to have been the work of the Turkish state. The French authorities still refuse to release important information to the investigating lawyers.

Linked to this is the case of the planned assassination of two leading Kurds in Brussels in 2017, which I discussed briefly last week after it was made public that two men had been convicted and sentenced to five years. On Tuesday, French weekly, Le Point, which has provided detailed coverage of both the French and Belgian cases, [highlighted](#) that one of the two convicted men, Zekeria Çelikbilek, lives openly in the French city of Reims.

There has been no [arrest](#) warrant from the Belgian public prosecutor and no request for his immediate arrest, and the suggestion is that there has been pressure from France not to take this further. Çelikbilek has previously boasted of his role in the 2013 assassinations, and named the former Turkish ambassador to France as responsible for coordinating the Belgian plot; and there is a claim that he worked for the French secret service.

On Thursday, a conference of European lawyers held at the European Parliament [stressed](#) the uniquely unbearable isolation being imposed on Abdullah Öcalan, but also looked at the more general “judicialisation of politics”, and the spread of exceptional and illegal treatment of political prisoners, including in places that are thought of as democracies.

Speakers noted how every violation of human rights opens the door to further violations, and how İmralı prison, where Öcalan is incarcerated, is used as a

model for restrictions in other prisons in Turkey and also beyond. We heard examples of calculatedly brutal mistreatment of prisoners in different parts of the world, and also how Turkey has persuaded other countries to do their bidding and deport Kurdish dissidents back to Turkish prisons.

For dissidents from Turkey seeking political asylum in Europe, this is a bad time. On Wednesday in Germany, Mehmet Çakas was [sentenced](#) to two years ten months in prison for membership of the PKK, though, as he himself has [explained](#), “I, like all Kurds, may have sometimes violated Turkish laws. But in Germany, where I lived for six years, I didn’t disturb the social order, didn’t break any laws, and didn’t even throw rubbish on the ground”. When he was refused asylum in Germany, Çakas went to Italy, but he was extradited back to Germany in March 2023 to stand trial. He spent a year [remanded](#) in various prisons where he was only allowed family visits under supervision and with no communication that was not in German or Turkish.

He is the fourth Kurd within a month to be sent to prison in Germany for membership of the PKK.

Also on Wednesday, 37 MPs in the Turkish Parliament [wrote](#) a call to the Serbian embassy on behalf of Ecevit Piroğlu.

Piroğlu was a political activist in Turkey, including at the Gezi Park protests, and joined the fight against ISIS in Rojava in 2015. In June 2021 he flew to Serbia, but was [arrested](#) at the airport on an Interpol warrant from Turkey. The case for extradition went back and forth between local and higher courts three times before the Supreme Court finally ruled against sending him back to Turkey; and following this decision he is still being kept in detention, not permitted political asylum in Serbia nor allowed to go to a third country. Piroğlu was on hunger strike for a near fatal 136 days during the extradition hearings and is now on hunger strike again.

In Sweden, 25 lawyers have [published](#) an open letter calling for an end to the criminalisation of the Kurds by the country’s security police, Säpo. They note that “The political position and activities of the Kurds, for which the same Kurds were initially granted protection in their new homeland, have been



classified as ‘terrorism’”; that “according to what we could discern in our daily work on these matters, the security police have the same broad definition of terrorism as Turkey”; and that, in Sweden, “the individual does not even get to know what he is accused of”.

It seems that Sweden’s rejection of Kurds does not only apply to people from Turkey. Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights has highlighted the case of an activist couple from Iran who “would face severe punishment if deported” but have had their asylum claims [refused](#).

This week’s most alarming news comes from France. While the Turk who was convicted of plotting Kurdish assassinations has been left to live freely, two young Kurds have been forcibly deported to face prison sentences in Turkey within three days of each other, and just two weeks after another deportation.

Mehmet Kopal was expelled on Tuesday and [imprisoned](#) on his arrival in Turkey, but not before being photographed handcuffed beside a Turkish flag – “exhibited today like loot by the Turkish media” in the words of the Conseil Démocratique Kurde en France (CDK-F).

Serhat Gültekin was taken to a detention centre on Thursday. He was due to [appear](#) before a judge on Saturday to rule on his detention, and had also filed an appeal against removal, but on Friday, before his lawyers could give his defence, he was handcuffed, bound and gagged and put on a plane to Istanbul.

What makes this case even more worrying is that Gültekin is seriously ill with Marfan syndrome. He has been [reported](#) to have been taken straight to prison to serve a sentence of six years and three months. He was not allowed to meet his lawyers, who have demanded that he be taken to hospital for medical treatment, as well as be allowed legal help.

Around a hundred people [gathered](#) at the CDK-F building in Paris on Friday night, and a demonstration was called for Saturday. One of the [demonstration](#) placards asks “What remains of the country of human rights?”.



While writing about France, I want to talk about another case that was [mentioned](#) at the Brussels conference. In December 2020, arrests were made of seven young anarchists. One, who went by the nickname Libre Flot, and who had fought alongside the YPG in Rojava, was held in solitary confinement until April 2022, only finally being released after a hunger strike of 37 days left him dangerously ill and hospitalised. I wrote about the case for this column at the time. I can now add that, although they were all found guilty of “terrorist criminal association”, and Libre Flot was given a five year sentence last December, his extended isolation was [condemned](#) by a French court the previous April

## **Elsewhere**

Just a few more updates before I finish. Turkey’s Supreme Election Board rejected the Provincial Board’s decision to cancel the Halfeti election won by the DEM Party, though the Hilvan re-run will still take place.

Anger at Turkey’s [continued](#) trade with Israel – anger that was notably demonstrated at the ballot box – persuaded the Turkish government to announce export restrictions on Israel for 54 products.

Exports are still possible via third countries though, and it is [argued](#) that the impact will be more political than economic.

Next Wednesday, a Turkish court will [announce](#) the verdict in the Kobanê Case against 108 Kurdish politicians including the former co-chairs of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP).

And tomorrow, thousands of Kurds will be here in Strasbourg to remind the Council of Europe and its Committee for the Prevention of Torture of their duty to protect Öcalan’s human rights. The protest was meant to take place over three days, but the French government only gave permission for one.

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