

# “He can do anything to reach power again,” – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

On Friday 7 April, a drone exploded in Sulaymaniyah Airport in the part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that is controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Close to the explosion, a US military convoy was carrying Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Ilhan Ahmed, President of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council. Both the SDF and the Iraqi government clearly attribute the attack to Turkey, though the United States (as usual) has avoided calling out their NATO ally, even though their soldiers were potential targets. The government of Iraq lacks the power to do much more than protest and call for an apology from Ankara, but their [statement](#) of condemnation notes that “Attacks by Turkey’s military against the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been repeated,” and that the attack targeted a civilian airport.

As Abdi [observed to Al Monitor](#), this was not the first time he had been directly targeted by Turkey, with previous attempts including the attack on the headquarters of the joint anti-ISIS forces in Hasakah last November.

In a [video statement](#) following last week’s attack, Abdi observed that Turkey wanted to stop the coming together of the SDF with the PUK’s Counter Terrorism Group, Iraqi forces and international coalition forces in the fight against ISIS, and that they wanted to destroy the strengthening relations between North and East Syria and PUK controlled Sulaymaniyah. However, the attack didn’t stop these forces carrying out a [successful anti-ISIS operation](#) together the next day. Abdi also linked the attack to Turkey’s forthcoming election: “Without a doubt, Erdoğan and his group will resort to all options available to them to achieve a cheap victory, even if it means shedding the blood of the Kurds. He will try to exploit this situation to influence Turkish public opinion and win the elections.” Erdoğan wants a win to mobilise his nationalist base and neutralise the opposition, and, as Abdi told Al Monitor, “He can do anything to reach power again”.

There have been [suggestions](#) that the attack was intended as a warning rather than an actual assassination – a warning to the United States and to the PUK not to partner with the SDF. Hakan Fidan, the head of Turkey’s National Intelligence Agency (MİT) who plays an active role in foreign relations,

has [made it clear](#) to the PUK that for normalised relations with Turkey they must end relations with the SDF.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is controlled by two political parties run by two families. Each has their own peşmerga forces, and their intense rivalry led, in the 1990s, to civil war. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzanis controls the north of the region round Erbil and Duhok and dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. The PUK of the Talibanis controls Sulaymaniyah and the south. Neither party has shied away from opportunistic alliances, but the KDP leadership have increasingly become vassals of the Turkish state. The KDP tied the region into a long-term oil deal with Turkey (now declared illegal by an international court) and they have helped Turkey to establish a large and expanding network of military bases across the northern Iraqi mountains. They have supported parties that oppose the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and have contributed to the Administration's difficulties through their control of the single border crossing, restricting permission to cross and blockading the entry of many goods, including medical equipment.

The PUK, which has lost support to the KDP, has been critical of what has become, effectively, a Turkish military invasion of northern Iraq. In recent months, they have been strengthening links with (Kurdish dominated) North and East Syria, and the party leader, Bafel Talabani, has been calling for Kurdish unity.

On 15 March, two helicopters collided in a fatal crash over Duhok Province on their way to Sulaymaniyah. The nine passengers, who all lost their lives, were SDF counterterrorism (i.e. counter-ISIS) fighters who had been working with the US-led international forces and the PUK Counter Terrorism Group in the fight against ISIS. Turkey, which refuses to distinguish between the SDF and the PKK, which it regards as a terrorist organisation, has claimed that the PUK is under the control of the PKK, and suspended flights to Sulaymaniyah following the crash. In a characteristically evidence-free statement, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, the Turkish Foreign Minister, [declared](#) "The PKK has now taken control of everybody in Sulaymaniyah, particularly the party of Talabani. And

slowly it [the PKK] has infiltrated not only into the party, but into the administration, into the airport and other strategic places”.

The KDP has backed the Turkish government line and put all blame for the attack on its PUK rivals. A spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government [stated](#), “The behaviour of an authoritarian party regime in Sulaymaniyah led to the closure of Turkish airspace towards Sulaymaniyah International Airport and then this attack,” But the region’s deputy prime minister, the PUK’s Qubad Talabani, made clear that this statement only represented the view of the KDP and not the whole government. The PUK not only condemned the attack but blamed members of the KDP for acting for foreign interests and undermining the region’s security. Their political bureau [stated](#), “An intelligence and espionage plot executed in advance led to the attack on Sulaymaniyah International Airport, equivalent to sending an occupying force into the Kurdistan Region. Hence, we strongly condemn this attack. We expected the relevant authorities to act, investigate, and condemn this crime rather than blindly justify it. However, as in the past, a self-imposed minority within the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) with special and secret connections has become guides for using the government’s institutions in service of other countries’ intelligence agencies to undermine the security of the Kurdistan Region and Sulaymaniyah Province.”

In a further sign of KDP loyalty to Turkey – to the detriment of their persecuted Kurdish brothers and sisters – the party leader, Masoud Barzani, has [been in conversation](#) with the leader of the far-right Hüda Par. Barzani is credited with having helped persuade Hüda Par to support Erdoğan’s government. Hüda Par, which combines Kurdish nationalism and Islamism, is a descendent of the Kurdish Hezbollah (no relation to the Lebanese organisation), which was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of progressive dissidents, including many Kurds, in the 1990s. It has recently been [reported](#) that 58 Hezbollah members who were convicted of a total of 183 murders were released after the party declared their support for Erdoğan in the last presidential election.

## Election “politics”

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The Kobanê case, in which leading members of the HDP face the possibility of life imprisonment without parole, is also drawing to a close after a procedure riddled with serious irregularities. On Friday, defendants and their lawyers [walked out of the court](#) after being refused permission to make their proper defences, and the prosecutor was left talking to a near empty room. Erdoğan has not held back from describing the defendants as guilty even as the case is being heard.

In 2014, with the city of Kobanê under siege from ISIS, the HDP called for street protests. A violent response from the security forces and from counter-protesters, including Hüda Par, resulted in the deaths of some 50 people. The HDP leaders are accused of their “murder”. Last week, in an attempt to win Kurdish votes in the Kurdish “capital”, Amed (Diyarbakir), Erdoğan [described](#) the HDP leaders as murderers who called “my Kurdish brothers” to the streets and killed “our 51 children”, and he spoke at a Mosque opening [packed](#) with hundreds of Hüda Par supporters.

In a new court case, Cengiz Çandar, a well-known journalist who returned to Turkey from Sweden in order to stand for election on the Green Left list, is being [prosecuted](#) for a social media post made six years ago in which he praised a former Gezi Park protestor who had died fighting ISIS in Syria.

And another office opening by the Green Left party has been [attacked](#) by police, this time in the Kiziltepe district of Mardin province.

Freedom of speech is essential for democracy but continues to be attacked. Journalists taken into custody in Amed in June have now been [indicted](#) on terrorist charges. The 728-page indictment describes in detail the journalists' work, claiming it as evidence against them. It quotes [secret witnesses](#), too, including one who also testified in the HDP closure case.

In general, the vicious disciplinary control of the Turkish justice system continues to sink to new lows. On Tuesday a court found a Kurdish man, Osman Şiban, [guilty under the terrorism laws](#) and sentenced him to 7 ½ years. Şiban's image has become familiar as one of the two men who are alleged to have been thrown out of a flying helicopter by the Turkish military in 2020. The other man, Servet Turgut, has not survived. An MP from the Turkish Workers' Party (TİP), who wrote a report on the case, observed, "From Şiban's account, it appears that the incident of being thrown out of the helicopter was only one detail of many hours of torture and mass beatings, and that the incident that killed Turgut and seriously injured Şiban was in fact severe torture and mass beatings."

Last Saturday, the police yet again [blocked](#) the weekly vigil of the "Saturday Mothers" who demand information about disappeared family members. The Constitutional Court has actually found in favour of the Mothers' right to demonstrate, but the police have taken no notice of this. Among the 15 people detained last Saturday was the co-chair of the Human Rights Association, Eren Keskin.

Meanwhile, the Turkish government shows no let-up in its attacks in North and East Syria (on Thursday night a [drone](#) killed a prominent member of the SDF), nor, despite the PKK's ceasefire, in the Iraqi mountains and in South-East Turkey. Last Saturday a young PKK fighter was [killed](#) in Mardin along with his civilian uncle.

The election also appears to be the motivation for [rushing ahead](#) with the construction of a new Russian-sponsored nuclear power plant, despite urgent warnings of the risk of building this in an area liable to earthquakes. President

Putin may visit Turkey at the delivery of the first fuel at the end of April, two weeks before Turkey goes to the polls.

From the opposition has come a campaign in the supermarkets designed to remind voters of Erdoğan's responsibility for rising prices and the often unbearably high cost of living. A graphic designer [produced stickers](#) to be left on the goods for sale – and soon found himself detained for “insulting the president” and “disrupting the electoral order”. He was subsequently released with a travel ban and has gone on to produce more stickers with new messages. Some included a [QR code](#) which linked to a video clip of one of Erdoğan's past statements in which he insists “I am the person responsible for Turkey's economy.”

Worryingly, the opposition İYİ Party has also produced a [racist video](#) linking immigrants to crime. One thing we can probably predict with certainty is that this will not be the last use of the race card, which has proved its ability to garner support.

More positively, the HDP's imprisoned co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, has [called via Twitter](#) for “a promise to our people” to “do our best to completely disarm the PKK” – through negotiating a democratic peace.

A worrying consequence of the HDP being forced to run under the Green Left list concerns the monitoring of the large expatriate vote. Monitoring is carried out by the largest parties in the previous election, but the third party was the HDP and not the Green Left. The HDP/Green Left [will not be allowed to be present](#), and their place will be taken by the fourth largest party, Erdoğan's main far-right allies, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

Two weeks ago, I looked at Turkey's list system and the argument that alliance parties should enter elections as part of a single list to avoid competing against each other for votes and so losing out altogether. This week, with the lists published, we can see how the opposition Nation Alliance [plans to reduce](#) this destructive competition. The four smaller parties in the alliance will compete as part of the Republican People's Party (CHP) list.



Although the CHP and the İYİ party will run separate list in most places, in 16 provinces they will compete under a single list – a nominally CHP list in nine and nominally İYİ party in seven. In the People's Alliance, the smaller parties will compete under the list of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) while the MHP will compete on a rival list. For the Labour and Freedom Alliance, all parties will join the HDP on the Green Left list except for TİP, which – to many people's disappointment – is standing separately. In shock news, the HDP's deputy chair, Meral Beştaş, suffered a serious back injury in a car crash when electioneering on Thursday.

## **Syria**

Erdoğan would also like to be able to boast of an agreement with the Syrian Government, but, despite Russian pressure, this is proving elusive. President Assad is only willing to talk if Turkey withdraws its troops. The next four party meeting between Russia, Syria, Turkey, and Iran has been [postponed](#) until May.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government continues to put pressure on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria by blockading the enclaves that are separated from the rest: Al Shahba, where most of the people displaced from Afrîn have found a temporary home, and the Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiya neighbourhoods of Aleppo. Their five-year-old siege has been [tightened](#) to exclude all fuel and medicines. People going in and out of these regions are [stopped at checkpoints and made to pay tax](#). Lack of equipment means that the [demolition of earthquake-damaged homes](#) can take place only slowly.

## **Iran**

Mainstream news has forgotten Iran, but with the end of the spring new year holiday, reports of school poisonings have started again. Hengaw Organization for Human Rights [reports](#), "The continuation of organized chemical attacks on schools has taken on an increasing trend, and in one working day, at least 27 schools were attacked". The Kurdistan Teachers'



Union (Saqqez and Ziviyeh) has described the alleged poisonings as systematic and organised, and has claimed that the perpetrators have the support of the authorities. Saqqez shopkeepers [closed their shops](#) in protest. The death of a [sixteen-year-old boy](#) has been blamed on a gas attack on a school in Tehran: the second child death blamed on poison attacks.

### **Today in Dusseldorf**

Today, Kurds from Europe are [rallying in Dusseldorf](#) to call for freedom for their imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. This is a replacement for the annual Strasbourg demonstration, which was postponed due to the earthquake. It will also serve to rally people round the Green Left's election campaign.

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