

# A fragile flicker of light on a dark day – a weekly news review

As Kurds mark the 26th anniversary of Öcalan's abduction and imprisonment, anticipation competes with foreboding. Will Turkey allow the recent meetings with Öcalan to develop into a peace process, or will they shut the door again and simply continue their unremitting attacks on Kurds and Kurdish freedoms? Meanwhile, the mayor of Van has been sentenced to prison, Turkish pressure is sabotaging hopes of an agreement between the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the new interim government in Damascus, and international bodies are again failing to rise to the occasion.

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Today, tens of thousands of Kurds from across Europe are marching through Strasbourg to demand Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan and a political solution to the Kurdish Question. 15 February is the anniversary of Öcalan's abduction and imprisonment 26 years ago, and is always marked by major marches. This year, the campaign has reached a new intensity with the recent meetings between Öcalan and representatives of the pro-Kurdish DEM Party, and the expectation of a video message from Öcalan himself. It is now clear that we will have to wait a little longer for Öcalan's message, but statements from the PKK underline the commitment to a peaceful resolution on the Kurdish side, and the ongoing power struggles in Middle East politics ensure that the Kurds are a force that should not be ignored.

At the same time, Turkey has not stopped their attacks on Kurds both within and outwith their borders. This week, these have included a prison sentence for the co-mayor of Van: his replacement with a Trustee can be expected to follow shortly. We are also witnessing the exclusion of the Kurds and their institutions from the institutional developments taking place in Syria, in accordance with Turkish wishes.

On the international front, the picture is more mixed. Turkey's ousting of elected mayors was condemned by the European Parliament, and a representative from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is a delegate at the world's major security conference in Munich. But in Thursday's international talks in Paris on the future of Syria, the Autonomous Administration could only watch. And the German section of the long march to Strasbourg was hassled and attacked by German police.

### **A black day**

For the Kurds, 15 February is known as Roja Reş, or Black Day. Öcalan's capture was the product of an international conspiracy in which the CIA played a leading role, but many other states contributed vital actions. The anniversary is a reminder of international complicity in Kurdish oppression, and in the oppression of all movements that seek to disrupt established hierarchies and put forward a progressive alternative to capitalist dominance. The conspiracy against Öcalan and the Kurdish Freedom Movement that he leads still goes on, notably in the failure to hold Turkey to account for their trashing of Öcalan's human rights, and in the widespread adoption – at Turkey's bidding – of a terrorism listing for his Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK.

The conspirators expected that Öcalan's arrest would decapitate the PKK and remove the Kurdish Freedom Movement from Turkish politics. They discovered immediately, with the eruption of world-wide protests, that this was far from the case.

The emergence of the Autonomous Administration, which has been attempting to put Öcalan's ideas into practice in North and East Syria, has allowed these ideas and the movement behind them to win sympathetic supporters across the world. Öcalan's philosophy resonates with people who are looking for an alternative to the hegemonic capitalist system that is generating ever greater inequalities and destroying our planet.

Öcalan's writings from his first years in prison developed his ideas further and made them more widely accessible, and although he is no longer able to be personally involved in organising the Kurdish Freedom Movement, millions of Kurds consider him their undisputed leader. He is uniquely placed to achieve a peace agreement if ever the Turkish Government is ready to engage with him in sincerity.

In prison, Öcalan has always been denied human rights stipulated in international – and Turkish – law, especially with respect to contact with the outside world. Strasbourg is the focus for protests because the Council of Europe based here is supposed to be the guardian of human rights. Prison visits to Öcalan have always been restricted and liable to be cancelled. Recently, for four and a half years, they were stopped completely, and for 43 months there was no communication at all. Then, this October, a visit was allowed by his MP nephew, and this has been followed by two long visits by leading members of the DEM Party, and the promise of a message to the Kurdish people – now expected sometime before the end of this month.

The surprise catalysing force behind what cannot yet be called a peace process (though it might become one) is President Erdoğan's far-right ally and leader of the National Movement Party, Devlet Bahçeli. It seems that Bahçeli and others in the Turkish state are concerned that the current shake up in the Middle East could result in Kurds gaining greater strategic power as different regional actors compete for their support, and that they want Turkey to look at the possibility of a peace deal in order to pre-empt this.

How far Erdoğan is on board with this understanding and approach is unclear. The Turkish government is playing a hard game, and continues to attack Kurds and Kurdish freedoms through military force, the politicised judiciary, and political intervention.

A message from Öcalan will be a historic moment, but whether it can lead to peace will depend on Erdoğan's next moves. These, in turn, will depend on how he perceives his personal interest: on whether he is ready to stop playing the anti-Kurdish "race" card and let Turkey benefit from unity and peace, or whether he believes that his image and power is better served by maintaining a state of constant war.

Öcalan [has been ready](#) for peace since the 1980s, through many different Turkish governments. No Kurds can forget [his message](#) read out to the Newroz gathering in Diyarbakir in 2013, when it seemed that the Kurdish struggle would at last move onto a new political path – nor the betrayal of Erdoğan's complete about turn. After the HDP (the DEM Party's predecessor) ended his overall majority in the June 2015 election, he claimed no knowledge of the roadmap agreed at Dolmabahçe Palace, and replaced peace talks with a policy of violent annihilation.

To prevent such a scenario from happening again, Kurds want the involvement and investment of all political parties and civil society organisations in any peace process that may follow these initial talks – not just the government. The DEM Party members who visited Öcalan in İmralı island prison have held talks with different political parties in Turkey and are about to visit political leaders in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Öcalan's message is expected to follow after this last visit.

The Turkish Government chooses to forget that the PKK only took up arms because Turkey took away Kurdish rights and blocked all peaceful routes for Kurds to campaign for their freedoms. If the government wants to see the PKK put down their arms and move to a new political way of being, then they need to address the oppressions that made them take up arms in the first place. As a minimum, they need to address Kurdish rights, and they need to address Turkey's democracy, so as to make political action possible. And, as a first step towards a peaceful future they need to end Öcalan's illegal isolation and enable him to talk freely and privately with all those involved in negotiations, from politicians to guerrillas.

Cemil Bayik, co-chair of the KCK – the Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union, which includes the PKK, [gave an interview](#) to Stêrk TV on Thursday in which he said that they had received a letter from Öcalan. Bayik stressed the importance of everyone uniting around Öcalan's attempt to move the Kurdish issue from the arena of war to that of democracy, and so spoil Turkey's games of deceit, which pretend that all that is required for peace is for the PKK to lay down their arms.

### **More attacks on Kurdish politicians and Turkey's democracy**

While Kurds talk of moving from war to democracy, and democracy remains a central requirement of a genuine peace deal, Turkey is continuing to clamp down on democratic freedoms. This week, Abdullah Zeydan, co-mayor of Van, a metropolitan municipality with 1.2 million inhabitants, [was given a prison sentence](#) of three years nine months in another politically motivated court case. This will be a prelude to his removal and replacement with a government appointed trustee. Zeydan was the mayor whose election was initially disputed, but then confirmed after major protests that included international outcry. This time [there are big protests](#) in Van, despite the winter cold, but international media has not registered what is happening.

This election cycle has also seen the removal of mayors from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), and the CHP Mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, who is a potential challenger for the presidency, is again [being taken to court](#) on absurd petty charges designed to block his political ambitions. He was formally indicted on Wednesday for a comment made to Istanbul's chief public prosecutor, who had been accused of politicising the judiciary.

Friday saw more dawn raids, with activists, lawyers and members of pro-Kurdish parties [detained](#) in various cities.

### **Sidelining the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria**

Some in Turkey may be concerned that Kurds in Syria could find new opportunities and backers for achieving greater independence, but the new political circumstances have also provided new openings for Turkey's attempt to destroy the Autonomous Administration built by the Kurds in North and East Syria. Turkey's mercenary militias that make up the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA) are carrying out physical attacks

with the backing of Turkish air power and the support of Turkish intelligence; and Turkey's political leaders [are working to ensure](#) that Ahmed al-Sharaa's new regime in Damascus does not come to any arrangement with the Autonomous Administration and their Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey enabled the growth of al-Sharaa's Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and they are now trying to make themselves indispensable to al-Sharaa's government. In exchange they expect Syria to fall in line with their mission to destroy all aspects of Kurdish autonomy.

The success of Turkish political interference has been demonstrated by the latest announcements from Damascus. On Wednesday, al-Sharaa's presidential office [announced](#) the formation of a seven-person committee that would make preparations for the planned Syrian National Dialogue Conference. This ticked Western boxes with the inclusion of two women – both involved with human rights – which is important for al-Sharaa's hopes of seeing an end to sanctions; but it includes no Kurds or representatives from the Autonomous Administration, which controls a quarter of Syria and is home to 4-5 million people. The new committee has made clear that the Autonomous Administration has been excluded because of their refusal to integrate the SDF into the Syrian army. The SDF has accepted the idea of integration, but not on the terms insisted on by HTS, which would treat SDF soldiers as individuals, not as a block with its own command and ability to defend their region from attack.

In a similar vein, the new Syrian Ministry for Higher Education [has announced](#) a list of recognised universities that omits every university in North and East Syria. Their degrees and diplomas will thus count for nothing in other parts of Syria.

In another reminder, if one were needed, of the importance of not simply subsuming North and East Syria under centralised Syrian rule, the new interim government [has used](#) an Assad era law to dissolve the general assembly of Syria's journalists' union and appoint external figures to take temporary control.

The SDF is currently holding the line against the SNA's military attacks. It is not conceding more territory, and is carrying out successful counterattacks against SNA bases. But Turkey is still bombing the region's villages, and the destruction of vital infrastructure and the constant uncertainty has taken its toll on the population. This inevitably [impacts support for the Administration](#) – as it is intended to do.

## **Turkey and Syria in Europe**

Upheavals in the Kurdish regions have been on the European agenda, and while European actions never reflect the gravity of what is required, this week's news is not all disappointing.

Here in Strasbourg, the European Parliament has passed a motion criticising Turkey's democratic backsliding, and especially the dismissal of elected mayors. For the first time, they have called on the EU's High Representative, Kaja Kallas "to consider imposing restrictive measures under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime against Turkish officials [assuming](#) the role of trustee and those appointing them."

In Paris, at Thursday's international conference on Syria, President Macron [stressed](#) the importance of the SDF in the fight against ISIS, but when he called for their integration into the new Syria, he did not specify what he meant. He made no mention of any form of autonomy. Al-Sharaa's interim government was represented in Paris, of course, along with ministers from many other countries, including Turkey. But, as they discussed the importance of a "Syrian-led process", there was no seat at the table for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria because they are not a state. [The agreed final statement](#) has many references to terrorists, which will be interpreted differently depending on who is using them, but there is nothing about any of the democratic institutions and social achievements of this other part of Syria, where human rights principles are an integral part of a constitutional social contract.

North and East Syria is, however, [being represented](#) at the ongoing Munich Security Conference, which is not restricted to state representatives. Of course this is important, but the Autonomous Administration is about so much more than security, and defence against ISIS.

Meanwhile, in another part of Germany, young people on the final stages of their long march to the Strasbourg demonstration [have faced](#) police intimidation and violence and a subsequent ban on continuing through Freiburg. One Kurdish activist commented to Firat News Agency, "The entire police strategy was designed to escalate the situation." As a result, over sixty people were temporarily detained and there are investigations ongoing.

As I wind up this review and prepare for the Strasbourg march, I think about the number of times we have seen campaigns with slogans such as "the time has come". Could it be true this time? Kurds will be out in force giving their backing to Öcalan and his call for a new democratic path to peace; but I am reminded of another well-quoted phrase: the only certainty is that nothing is certain.

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