

Erdoğan puts the world on probation – a weekly news review

For Erdoğan, Sweden's desperation to join NATO is a gift that keeps on giving. Every moment that he keeps Sweden waiting provides the opportunity for him to squeeze further concessions from the Swedish government and from other countries that are also desperate to see Sweden's accession – notably the United States. This week's news review focuses on the NATO summit, but also looks, among other things, at threats to Öcalan, developments in the Turkish courts, the dominance of religious cults, Iranian attacks on Kurds in Iraq, and continued pressure from Turkey on North and East Syria.

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For Turkey's President Erdoğan, Sweden's desperation to join NATO is a gift that keeps on giving. Like every other NATO member, Turkey can veto Sweden's application, and the bargaining power this has given him is not something Erdoğan intends to give up until he has to. Every moment that he keeps Sweden waiting provides the opportunity for him to squeeze further concessions from the Swedish government and from other countries that are also desperate to see Sweden's accession – notably the United States.

On Monday – the eve of the NATO summit in Vilnius – NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, tweeted a photograph of himself in a triple handshake with Erdoğan and the Swedish Prime Minister, Ulf Kristersson, [announcing](#) that "President Erdogan has agreed to forward Sweden's accession protocol to the Grand National Assembly ASAP & ensure ratification." Excited "Breaking News" stories were quickly followed by

speculation as to what it was that had clinched the deal, and by discussions of Turkey's swing towards the West. But Sweden's politicians and media soon learnt that they had celebrated too soon.

On Tuesday, the Swedish Solidarity Committee for Rojava [pointed out](#) that "Turkey has not said yes, Erdogan has. Now he has to get it through parliament" – and that parliamentary approval couldn't be taken for granted. The pro-government Sabah newspaper [reported](#) that "Erdogan evaluated the meeting [with Stoltenberg and Kristersson] with the words, 'The match continues, the score is still 0-0. We need to see the coming minutes.'"

After the closure of the summit on Wednesday, Erdoğan [told](#) reporters that, due to the summer recess, the Turkish parliament would not even consider the case until October, and he has made it clear that up until that time Sweden will be on probation.

The NATO press statement [put out](#) after Monday's meeting especially focused on "terrorism" and Swedish cooperation with Turkey's "legitimate security concerns". In the world view of the Turkish government, the biggest terrorist threat is the PKK, under which heading they include all groups sympathetic to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. They have persuaded many countries to list the PKK as a terrorist organisation, though the arguments for doing this are clearly political rather than based on any legal logic. Now they want to persuade these other countries to follow them in treating all these groups as terrorists.

The NATO statement makes clear that "Sweden reiterates that it will not provide support to YPG/PYD" – that is to the Kurdish organisations that can be thanked for protecting the world from ISIS and that continue to battle against ISIS resurgence, with help from the United States. Although NATO members understand ISIS as a terrorist organisation that has carried out major attacks in western countries, they are prepared to penalise the YPG and PYD in order to appease Turkey. America felt obliged to [confirm](#), in the wake of Monday's meeting, that they still regard the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – which includes the YPG – as a "critical counterterrorism partner" – however,

they have always made clear that their relationship only concerns the defeat of ISIS.

Sweden has promised to “present a roadmap as the basis of its continued fight against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations towards the full implementation of all elements of the Trilateral Memorandum [agreed at the previous NATO summit]”; and Sweden and Turkey have agreed to long-term “counter-terrorism” co-operation. NATO has also promised that they will significantly step-up counter-terrorism work.

As we saw after the last NATO summit, with Turkey holding the crucial veto card, what is written in the agreement is of less importance than Turkey’s interpretation of it. NATO can also be sure that Turkish pressure will not end with Sweden’s admittance into NATO. It can be applied whenever the block needs to agree on mutual action, and the promised “Special Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism” will find themselves pushed to accept Turkey’s definition of who qualifies as a terrorist.

Arms sales

It is not only Sweden whose actions will be monitored by Turkey. Erdoğan has been using the leverage of the veto to try and force concessions from others too. Although Turkey insists publicly that discussions over whether Turkey can buy F16 fighter jets from the United States are unconnected to lifting the veto on Sweden, this has always been regarded as an important part of the NATO negotiations, not least by President Biden. Resistance has come from the US Congress, and especially from Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, Bob Menendez, who is [concerned](#) about Turkey’s threat to Greece. Relations between Greece and Turkey have calmed down somewhat, and Menendez had given indications that he would allow the sale, however, he has also said that he wants to be sure that the improvement in relations is lasting. Biden and Erdoğan met on the fringes of the NATO conference for over an hour on Tuesday, and their statements afterwards [exhibited](#) a new warmth. US journalist Seymour Hurst [gives](#) a further reason for that warmth, claiming that, behind the scenes, “Biden promised that a much-needed \$11-13 billion line of credit would be extended to Turkey by the International Monetary Fund.”

Ragip Soylu, for [Middle East Eye](#), attributes Erdoğan's apparent softening over Sweden to the F16 deal, and also to Canada lifting their ban on arms exports to Turkey. Sweden and Finland have both ended similar bans, and one of the issues that Turkey insisted on including in the agreement was that member states should not be allowed to sanction each other. Ending the Canadian ban will give Turkey access to Canadian drone optics, which they have used before with lethal consequences. Both drone optics and F16s can be used by Turkey in their fight against the Kurds.

The European Union

In the run-up to the summit, Erdoğan surprised everyone by introducing European Union membership into the equation, and suggesting that Swedish membership of NATO could be bought by Turkish membership of the EU. The EU has been discussing removing Turkey from the category of candidate country on the grounds that they have only been moving further away from complying with the fundamental "Copenhagen Criteria" on democracy and the rule of law; and it is clear that EU membership is not on the table. Turkish membership has been made even more improbable by the increase in the anti-Muslim right within Europe, and by Turkey's agreement with the EU to keep migrants out of the union. However, there has been talk of preferential trade agreements (especially important for Turkey's troubled economy) and easier visas, and Erdoğan could benefit from these without having to address Turkey's democratic deficit.

While there was still a chance that Turkey might become a member of the EU, there was a hope that this would encourage them to become more democratic. If membership discussions are formally ended, but the EU is still ready to agree beneficial economic arrangements, then they lose the possibility to pressure Turkey over rights abuses. Sweden has [agreed](#) to "actively support efforts to reinvigorate Türkiye's EU accession process, including modernisation of the EU-Türkiye Customs Union and visa liberalisation." And the EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, has [discussed](#) with Erdoğan "Scope for strengthening the EU-Türkiye relationship".

Turkey and Russia

Erdoğan's wooing of NATO even extended to supporting NATO membership for Ukraine and [returning](#) five Russian-captured Azov Battalion commanders to Kyiv in defiance of a prisoner exchange agreement with Russia. But this should not be taken to imply genuine support – just a continuation of the same calculated politics, exploiting different powers in the pursuit of Turkish dominance.

Russia [understands](#) this, though they are not happy about the support for Ukraine; and the return of the Azov prisoners damages Turkey's credibility. They had no illusions in Turkey's friendship, and now it is their turn to be reminded that every bit of Turkish support is transactional and has to be earned.

The view from the PKK

In the eyes of the PKK, Turkey is forcing NATO to back a genocidal policy against the Kurds. Duran Kalkan of the PKK's Executive Council [told](#) Medya Haber that the Turkish government wants to "make everyone accept the genocide of the Kurds, carry out attacks to destroy Kurdishness saying that it is attacking terrorism." He claims that "In Turkey's plan, NATO will... give Ankara political and military support. In other words, NATO will support the genocide of the Kurds."

From NATO's perspective, this support is largely a by-product of their politically calculated need to keep Turkey on side, in the same way that the omission of Kurdish rights from the Treaty of Lausanne a hundred years ago was the product of wider geopolitical calculations; however, the Kurdish Freedom Movement's criticism of capitalism and of the nation state also makes them a target in their own right.

Abdullah Öcalan

Turkey's harnessing of international support in their battle against the Kurds is not new. It is now over 24 years since the Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured by a CIA-led international conspiracy and handed over to the Turkish state. His initial death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment when Turkey abolished capital punishment, but his conditions have been so

restricted as to constitute almost a living death. His isolation in İmralı island prison has been increased so that he has had no contact with the outside world since March 2021. However, some pieces of information do manage to get out. Last Saturday, Sabri Ok, a member of the executive of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella organisation that includes the PKK, [announced](#) on Sterk TV, “we know that anonymous letters were given to Rêber Apo [Abdullah Öcalan] by the occupying Turkish state and the İmralı administration. Those letters said to Rêber Apo that he will be given such a poison that it would kill him. The letters said that he would die day by day, without realising it.”

The impact of such threats is [enhanced](#) by fears that Öcalan may have been subjected to progressive poisoning in 2007. Then, hair samples smuggled out of the prison showed high levels of strontium and chromium, but the sample was very small and subsequent tests [organised](#) by the Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture did not find anything that would cause concern. As Ok pointed out, the threatening letters “play with Öcalan’s psychology, his mental health, his physical health.”

The Kurdistan National Congress in Brussels has [called](#) on the Council of Europe, the European Union and the United Nations to organise an “urgent ad hoc mission” to visit Öcalan – or at least to put pressure on Turkey to allow an immediate visit by his lawyers or family.

Around Turkey

In more positive news, at the first hearing of the case against 18 Kurdish journalists, the 15 defendants who had been remanded in custody for 13 weeks, were [released](#). However, the journalists’ trial still goes on – and although we celebrate those occasions when the Turkish courts do not simply act as government tools, they can also be used to give a false impression of a functioning legal system.

At the same time, a 14-year-old child has been [given](#) a five-month prison sentence for “insulting the president” in a WhatsApp group – though he will not actually be sent to prison – and an Islamist militant who had previously

been convicted of “establishing and leading an armed terrorist organisation” was released from prison. It is [claimed](#) that his release was a response to pressure from HÜDA-PAR, which had four MPs elected on the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) list.

The death of Abdülbaki Erol and the quarter of a million people who attended his funeral, for which Turkish Airlines [put on extra flights](#), has drawn attention to the large and growing role of religious cults in Erdoğan’s Turkey. Initially, this role was taken by the Gülen Movement, but when Erdoğan turned against his former allies, other organisations filled their place. Erol’s Menzil Community is the largest of these. They have major commercial interests, are believed to be strong within Turkey’s bureaucracy, and [support](#) right wing politics, including Erdoğan and his AKP government.

Meanwhile, in Cilemêrg (Hakkâri) Province, close to the Iraqi border, troop build ups and a letter to the village guards (local paramilitaries) have fuelled expectations of an [intensified](#) Turkish attack into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where they have been extending their military foothold and attacking the PKK.

Iraq and Iran

Turkey’s incursions into Iraq are supported by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) but [resented](#) by the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – just one of the differences between two parties who fought a civil war in the 1990s and whose antagonism is bringing the region’s politics to a standstill.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq also provides a refuge for Kurdish parties from Iran. These are armed, but have not intervened militarily in the uprising in Iran for fear of provoking an even more violent reaction than we have already seen. This hasn’t [stopped](#) Iran from attacking them, and now Iran is threatening to attack again if they have not been disarmed by September.

While Iran is holding off from committing another military assault, individual members of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) living in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are being assassinated. On Wednesday, Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights [reported](#) that the body of Siyâmend Shaboi was

found near Hewlêr (Erbil) with bullets in his back after years of threats from the Iranian security agencies. And early on Friday 7 July, Luqman Aji and Adel Mohajer were killed in Qaladze in Sulaymaniyah province, and a third man was injured. The suspect in that double killing is a former member of the party who had then joined the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and who [escaped](#) to Iran after the murders. These men join a long list of murdered Kurdish activists, which includes Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a former leader of the PDKI, the anniversary of whose murder in Vienna 34 years ago was marked on Thursday.

In Iran itself, Hengaw records a steady stream of detentions and arrests, and also the death in custody of two young men who are believed to have [lost their lives](#) under torture. Musa Esmaili was detained on 7 May. Last Sunday, his family was told to collect his body from the security facility. When they got there, the authorities refused to release his body, and threatened not to hold the funeral ceremony at a mosque, and the family was warned that media coverage would have catastrophic consequences. They were never [told](#) what he had been accused of.

Peyman Galwani, who died in custody on Monday, two weeks after his arrest, is [believed](#) to have been another member of the PDKI. Despite assertions from the authorities that he died from a fall or from a “severe illness”, Hengaw has [shared](#) pictures of his body showing severe bruising consistent with torture. His funeral in Mahabad [became](#) a mass protest, complete with the Kurdish resistance song, Ey Reqîb.

North and East Syria

Even beyond Turkey’s military strikes, the people of North and East Syria continue to suffer from Turkish aggression. The situation has not improved in Hasakah, where the shutting down of the Alouk pumping station by its Turkish occupiers has left over a million people without adequate or safe water. The Autonomous Administration is calling on the United Nations to get involved, but the UN’s special rapporteur [cancelled](#) his planned visit when the Syrian Government in Damascus did not allow access. The Syrian Government does

not want the Autonomous Administration to survive, and has shown itself happy for North and East Syria to be put under intolerable pressures.

Five more Syrian prisoners have [been taken](#) illegally to Turkey, where they can be expected to disappear into the prison system, out of contact with their families. This is a problem that has raised international concern in the past, but never been addressed.

In the last three months, a further 256 families [have fled](#) the trauma of life in Turkish-occupied Girê Spî, while Turkey has forcibly deported Syrian refugees to the occupied areas and to Idlib, completing the other half of their planned demographic changes in the region. North Press reports 200 Syrian refugees [taken](#) across the border on Monday, 47 Syrians [brought](#) to Serê Kaniyê on Wednesday, and 22 [taken](#) to Idlib on Thursday.

Turkey also facilitates continued activity by ISIS, both through direct support and by generating the social stresses on which ISIS thrives. A half year report by North Press shows that ISIS is still strong. In the first six months of this year, 262 people were killed in direct ISIS attacks in Syria. Of these, 141 were civilians, 64 were members of President Assad's Syrian army, 37 were members of the Autonomous Administration's SDF, and 20 were members of Iranian-backed factions. A further 101 people were killed by mines and other remnants of war left by ISIS, and 165 people were kidnapped, of whom 20 are confirmed dead. In the same period, operations against ISIS [resulted](#) in the arrest of over 1,000 ISIS suspects and the death of dozens of ISIS fighters.

With the need for defence remaining so strong, the claim made in the Russian media that the United States was sending SDF fighters to support Ukraine appears especially absurd; but it provided a neat way of slandering the SDF and making them seem like America's mercenaries rather than people of Syria defending their homeland. The SDF felt forced to issue a [statement](#) making clear that they "are not concerned with issues outside Syria."

The problem is not SDF involvement elsewhere, but external forces meddling in Syria. This week has provided another lesson in the corrosive impact of nation-state politics.

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