

# Stand-off in Syria and autocracy in Ankara – a weekly news review

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In the north of the Syrian city of Aleppo, the adjacent majority-Kurdish neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyah have created and developed their own autonomous structures. They are part of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but physically separated from the rest of the Autonomous area by Syrian Government controlled territory; and their relationship with the Syrian Government has been tenuous and tactical. As in other parts of North and East Syria, their autonomous administration stresses that they do not want to break away from Syria, but to continue developing their local control structures, which they propose as a

model for the whole of Syria. However, this is not a model that is seen as acceptable by President Assad, who has not given up his dream of returning to the pattern of centralised control in operation before the liberatory hopes of the Arab Spring and the brutality of the Syrian civil war. For Assad, all the Autonomous areas are a temporary aberration – useful so long as they repel ISIS and other jihadi militias, but destined, eventually, to return under his wing. With the backing of Russia, he takes every opportunity to put pressure on them so as to ensure that they cannot live and evolve in peace.

For Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, this has meant continued interference with what goes in and out of their region, with Syrian government checkpoints enforcing varying degrees of blockade and levies. Now, for over a month, the Syrian Arab Army has put an almost complete stop to the entry of basic foodstuffs, and, more recently, they have also been stopping the entry of medicines. In an area that is home to around 200,000 people, including many displaced families from Afrîn, bakeries have had to stop work because there is no flour. Massive levies have been imposed on the small amounts of essential products that have been allowed through, and these, together with their scarcity, mean that they sell for hugely inflated prices. There are also restrictions on the amount of money that people can bring in, affecting trade with the area's workshops. Last Saturday, a protest march of thousands of local people said, "no to the politics of starvation" and "we will not bow down to anyone".

Previous blockades have been resolved through negotiation, but negotiations this time have not yet yielded results. The Autonomous Administration has responded with counter pressure – not in Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh, where they have little room to manoeuvre, but on the Syrian Government controlled pockets in Qamishli. Their internal security forces (Asayish) are, according to a statement put out on Thursday, "adopting tight security measures on areas controlled by the Syrian regime". The Asayish say that these measures will "proceed until the blockade on our people in the Sheikh Maqsud quarter in Aleppo is lifted." They also claim that they are not stopping government services from working. As Rojava Information Centre explained to me, this means that the Autonomous Administration have imposed their own

boycott on goods going into the regime controlled “security square”, but civilian movement is unimpeded.

While the Autonomous Administration tries to stave off attacks on its autonomy on the ground, its Syrian Democratic Council is continuing the long and difficult process of building support for their proposals for a decentralised Syria. This has included two meetings in Stockholm – the second last weekend – sponsored by the Swedish government and attended by representatives from the US, the UK and Switzerland, as well as from Syria.

### **Syria's other actors**

At the same time, Turkish attacks on North and East Syria are increasing and there are fears that they will use this period, when the world (including Russia) is focused on Ukraine, to launch another large-scale attack. They have established new bases and received yet more reinforcements.

Not that the Ukraine war has stopped Russian action in Syria. After a lull in March, April has seen a large number of Russian airstrikes on the desert hideaways used by ISIS.

Other, even less predictable, dangers are hinted at by the rise in – sometimes deadly – infighting between different Turkish backed mercenaries. This may be more than the usual competition for loot, and could result from realignments between the different groups, including with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which many believe to be linked to al Qaeda.

### **Turkey's deadly judicial pantomime**

Last Sunday, in Şirnak, in southeast Turkey, a policeman deliberately backed his car into a lawyer, leaving him with multiple fractures in both legs. The policeman claimed to have “heard voices”. Sometimes it seems as though the Turkish state must also be hearing voices, as brutal impunity increasingly holds sway.

This week saw a new assault on the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), generating fresh speculation about an early election after the conclusion of the ongoing court cases against the party. This assault began on Monday with a police raid on the HDP's Cizre headquarters – the second such raid within four months. The police spent two hours ransacking the offices, breaking doors and windows, and walking with their boots across prayer carpets. They also detained ten people in house raids. The HDP responded with long post-Iftar vigils in front of their building over three days, where MPs, co-mayors, and activists were joined by a large crowd in a defiant party atmosphere. HDP Deputies have also submitted a parliamentary question about the raid and about earlier attacks on the Cizre district organisation.

On Tuesday, warrants were issued for the detention of 91 people, including HDP executives and co-mayors, and 48 people were detained across 13 cities. The Human Rights Association (İHD) has pointed out how the “politically motivated” detentions broke the Law on Criminal Procedures. Suspects should have been invited to the courthouse to testify and not have been detained in dawn raids. They shouldn't have been prevented from meeting their lawyers for 24 hours, and the investigation files should not have been denied to them. But, such practices have become the norm.

When HDP MPs and members met outside their Kadıköy district building to make a press statement about the detentions, their gathering was banned. They were blocked by the police, who attacked HDP Deputy, Musa Piroğlu, overturning his wheelchair and continuing to attack him on the ground. Now the MP is being charged with “insulting a public official”.

The people detained have been accused in an extension of the ongoing Kobanê Case – specifically, of helping to finance the protests of October 2014 and providing financial aid to “PKK members” involved. The Kobanê case has become the main vehicle for the government assault on the HDP. It could see 108 people, including the party's former co-chairs, MPs, co-mayors, and other leading members, locked in prison for life; and it provides the basis of the case for closing down the party. The Kobanê Case hinges on the party's call for people to go onto the streets in October 2014 to protest against the siege

of the city of Kobanê by ISIS, and also to protest against the inaction of the Turkish forces in the face of the imminent disaster taking place just across the border – an inaction made worse by Turkey stopping individuals from joining the resistance against ISIS. The angry but peaceful demonstrations were met by government forces with live ammunition and by right-wing counter protests, and in the ensuing violence at least 43 people were killed – predominantly members or supporters of the HDP. The HDP has many times requested an independent inquiry into what happened. Instead, they are being made to take the blame, and are accused of mass murder, as well as ‘attempted overthrow’ of the government.

The Kobanê trial itself has provided a macabre pantomime of judicial law breaking. The court president under which it was initiated is currently suspended and on house arrest, accused of organised crime and corruption. Key witness statements have been found inconsistent, and key witnesses have withdrawn their statements. Some of the people listed as complainants did not even know that their names had been included. Microphones of lawyers and defendants have been turned off when they have been speaking, and witnesses have been heard in the absence of lawyers and defendants.

Yesterday morning saw further detentions of political activists. 105 warrants were issued, and 66 people were detained in connection with last month’s Newroz celebrations. These included Kadri Esen, owner of the Kurdish newspaper, Xwebûn, and journalist Ali Koçer.

As President Erdoğan attempts to consolidate his image as protector of traditional “family values”, women’s rights organisations also come into his crosshairs – while violence against women and the impunity of the perpetrators give cause for growing concern. This week, too, the Istanbul Public Prosecutor’s Office filed a lawsuit against the campaigning organisation, We Will Stop Femicide, accusing them, on the basis of vague complaints, of “acting against the law and morality”.

In the increasingly febrile atmosphere, even the smallest act can trigger state violence. Last Saturday in Bingöl, police detained an 18-year-old, Mahfuz Taş, who had been making victory signs with his friends, and subjected him to

violent beatings. Taş reported that the police told him to die, and that they threatened “If you do not speak well about us, we will open a terrorism case against you. We will blacken your record”. Taş’s case has been raised by the HDP’s Bingöl Deputy in a parliamentary question for Interior Minister Sûleyman Soylu.

Parliamentary questions have also been asked – by the HDP’s Hişyar Özsoy – about a local imam’s refusal to wash the body of Mehmet Sevinç, who died in prison on 4 April. Washing a body is a religious obligation, and Özsoy asked on what religious or legal grounds this had been forbidden.

Increasing mistreatment and torture in Turkey’s prisons is generally focussed on political prisoners, but with such a brutal and brutalising system, it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the brutality has also been directed towards common prisoners. In Silivri No 5 L Type Closed Prison this had lethal consequences. Nine prisoners were driven to attempt suicide, with Ferhan Yılmaz losing his life just two days before he was due to be released. Yılmaz’s body showed evidence of torture and of a rope mark on the neck.

A ward of over fifty prisoners was subjected to physical beatings and psychological humiliation by a group of some sixty guards, who encouraged them to kill themselves – deliberately supplying them with razors and with shoes with laces to be used as a rope. A delegation of lawyers that has spoken to the prisoners found that this was part of a pattern of threatening and humiliating behaviour by the guards against people who were often already mentally troubled.

Recordings of a phone call to his family made by a young prisoner called Halil Kasal told of insults and beatings, and of being made to sleep on the dirt floor. Kasal began by saying that he could hardly manage to make the call, and he described attempting suicide after prison guards gave him a rope and told him to kill himself. That time they didn’t let him die, but he claimed that he and others had decided on suicide. Yılmaz’s death was raised in parliament by the main opposition People’s Republican Party (CHP).

This week has also seen some welcome legal judgements in Turkey, though these exemplify the aphorism that justice delayed is justice denied. Such rulings can allow the judiciary to give an appearance of greater independence than generally exists, but they may also be ignored by the government. After thirteen years, the Constitutional Court has ruled that making religion classes compulsory is a violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. And after four years, the Constitutional Court has ruled that the arrest of Leyla Güven after she had been elected as an MP in 2018 violated her rights. Also after four years, it was announced that lawyers who read out a statement about Turkey's attack on Afrîn in 2018 would not be prosecuted.

The latest annual report by the US State Department looking at human rights in Turkey was published on Tuesday. It is damning, but has been instantly brushed off by Turkey, and is unlikely to have much impact on US actions if those actions are perceived to be in US interests.

### **All is not well in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

The US State Department also produced a report on its friends in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, where it noted violations against journalists and activists, and restrictions on freedom of expression, and observed that certain units of the internal security forces "operated with impunity".

One of the situations discussed in the KRG report is that of the activists and journalists known as the Bahdinan prisoners. Some have been convicted, while others are on remand, still waiting a trial date. All complain of torture, of alterations made to their statements, and of restrictions on lawyers' visits, as well as of generally poor conditions. They have made various attempts to draw attention to their situation and make pressure for change through hunger strikes, and five activists from Shiladze, who have been held on remand since December 2020, announced this week that their hunger strike had reduced their health to a critical condition.

14 April is designated as a memorial day for the victims of Saddam Hussein's Anfal Genocide against the Kurds. Between 1986 and 1989, an estimated 200,000 people were killed – including in chemical attacks – and over a million were displaced. At the official memorial event in Chamchamal, the KRG's Minister of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs was prevented from finishing his speech by relatives of the victims who say they get no help from the Regional Government, which doesn't even provide them with basic services such as water, and which isn't helping to identify the bodies of Anfal victims found buried in the desert.

Meanwhile, Turkish attacks on the northern Iraqi mountains continue, even if the anticipated major offensive, flagged for 15 April, has not taken place. The risk of an offensive remains undiminished, and the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Masrour Barzani, who has been wholly supportive of Turkey's plans, met President Erdoğan in Istanbul yesterday. The official photograph of the meeting portrays the KRG delegation as supplicants before Erdoğan's throne.

Masrour Barzani's next port of call will be the UK, where he can expect full support from the British Government – and, it seems, also from Labour MP, Mary Glendon, whose aide, Gary Kent, has been shown to have received £400,000 from various oil and construction companies closely linked to the KRG.

### **International solidarity**

For disinterested solidarity, we need to look beyond the politicians. This week, trade unionists organised a show of support for Abdullah Öcalan at the conference of the National Education Union in Bournemouth, and a Twitter campaign gave a message to the US government: #NoJetsForTurkey.

Recently, Roger Waters, of Pink Floyd, sent a guitar to imprisoned singer, Nûdem Durak, who is serving a 19-year sentence for her Kurdish songs. The Prison authorities didn't give it to her, so now, Waters is planning to further publicise the call for her release by bringing her a guitar himself, and getting it signed by other famous artists. International solidarity for the Kurdish singer



is already supported by many well-known names, and has taken a wide range of forms, including – besides concerts and musical compositions – a mural and a postage stamp.