

A social contract amid Syria's ruins – a weekly news review

On Tuesday, North and East Syria ratified a new Social Contract for the region, which they would like to see form the basis of a new constitution for the whole of Syria. It is a blueprint for radical bottom-up democracy, in line with Öcalan's philosophy, but it is being constructed amid the ruins of Turkey's attacks on the region's infrastructure; alongside destabilisation threats from Turkey, ISIS, the Syrian Government, and pro-Iranian militias; and under fears of greater regional conflict. This week's review also revisits the Jina Revolution in Iran with the winners of the EU's Sakharov Prize, and looks at some of the obstacles in the way of opposition politics in the run up to Turkey's regional elections.

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On Tuesday, the renamed General Council of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [ratified](#) a new Social Contract for the region, which they would like to see form the basis of a new constitution for the whole of Syria. War and epidemic – as well as the desire to maximise consultation with the people of this extensive and varied area – ensured that it took many years in the drafting, but this new Contract – effectively a constitution for the autonomous region – now replaces the original Social Contract adopted in 2014, which itself was revised in 2016. The contract is a blueprint for a radical bottom-up democracy, in line with Abdullah Öcalan's philosophy of Democratic Confederalism. This democracy is being constructed amid the ruins of Turkey's attacks on the region's infrastructure; alongside destabilisation threats from Turkey, ISIS, the Syrian Government, and Syria's allied pro-Iranian militias; and under fears of greater regional conflict as tensions build between the United States and Iran under the shadow of Gaza.

The Contract begins by enshrining broad general principles for an "ecological democratic society" with "justice and equality among all peoples" and women as a "fundamental pillar". The greater part of the document is devoted to the mechanics of the democratic system and its different tiers, from the local commune upwards. Rojava Information Centre (RIC), who have translated the Contract into English, comment that this new version gives less importance to the central executive council and allows scope for local referendums – provided these don't compromise basic principles – and it also explicitly allows for incorporation into a future democratic Syria that would preserve regional autonomy. The Syrian Government has, however, shown no sign that they are willing to negotiate any reduction of their former centralised power, and United Nations talks on the future of Syria – which Russia is trying to [restart](#) – are so concerned to appease Turkey that they don't even allow the Autonomous Administration a seat at the table. Within the region, the Contract will now form the basis for much-delayed elections.

The attention given to the democratic structures – including structures to build and maintain women’s rights – and also the attention to ensuring cultural freedom and political representation of different ethnicities and religions, is not matched with detail on how other principles should be put into practice. It is not stipulated how an economic system “based mainly on environmental, participatory and community economics” translates into law, or how private investments will be prevented from “harm[ing] the environmental societal economy”. While the Contract states that “Natural wealth and resources are public wealth for society”, this does not include land, and private property is protected.

The Charter commits the Autonomous Administration to “liberating the occupied territories and returning their people to their regions.” This would not be a simple process even if Turkey could be made to leave.

North and East Syria today

The forward-looking Charter has to be made real in the most difficult circumstances. RIC has also just published a dossier looking at the damage done to North and East Syria (NES) by Turkey’s October airstrikes. It concludes, “Turkey’s October campaign shattered NES’ fragile humanitarian infrastructure and has left the population heading into winter without adequate fuel, electricity or water. The impacts on civilians are cascading and – given that the AANES [Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria] cannot carry out the necessary repairs – will be long lasting. As emphasized in this dossier, the effects of Turkey’s airstrikes are as debilitating as they are because the underlying humanitarian and infrastructure situation in NES was already bad prior to Turkey’s escalation... [W]hile NES today still manages to be the most stable region in Syria, the humanitarian situation is dire. Turkey’s recurring attacks [compound](#) this situation, engineer insecurity and hamper the AANES’ progressive steps.” With the whole region struggling, IDP camps are finding themselves under extra strain. NGOs and the United Nations [provide](#) only a fraction of the help needed.

The only thing preventing further invasion and occupation by Turkey is the presence of Russian and American Troops. Turkey’s last invasion was enabled by Donald Trump’s withdrawal of US troops in 2019. America

still [maintains](#) 900 troops in Syria, and a motion to remove them was firmly [rejected](#) in the US Senate a week ago by a vote of 84 to 13. The Americans do nothing to prevent Turkish air attacks and cross-border bombardments, claiming that they are in Syria solely to fight ISIS in alliance with the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, as the Senate debate made clear, America is also in Syria to attempt to restrict the growing influence of Iran. US support for Israel continues to put US bases in Syria and Iraq in the sights of Iran-backed militias – they have been [targeted](#) 97 times since 7 October – and America's stance also makes the US the object of more general opprobrium. The SDF may find that their tactical alliance against ISIS brings new dangers that outweigh America's distinctly limited protection.

The Syrian Government and allied pro-Iranian militias [continue](#) to cross the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor in an attempt to stir up local discontent and to attack SDF bases. And ISIS is always [ready](#) to attack in areas such as Deir ez-Zor where resources are already stretched.

Meanwhile, the siege imposed by the Syrian government on those parts of the Autonomous Administration that are geographically separated from the rest continues to turn everyday life into a struggle for survival. Basic supplies of food, fuel, and medicine are all severely restricted. Hospitals are unable to function, schools are closed, and bakeries barely operate. For a young boy in one of the camps in Shehba that is inhabited by families displaced by the Turkish occupation of Afrîn, the struggle was too much. Sozdar Hesên [died](#) of cold on 2 December.

Syrian Government and Russian forces are also carrying out a major attack on Idlib in northwest Syria, which is under the control of Al Qaeda offshoot, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and is protected by Turkey. There are fears that Russia and Turkey might make an agreement whereby Turkey would allow Russia to destroy HTS in exchange for Russia letting them attack the SDF and [assert](#) control over the predominantly Kurdish northern areas of Syria. This only accentuates the need to persuade President Assad to enter serious negotiations with the Autonomous Administration.

“Woman Life Freedom” in the European Parliament

This week, here in Strasbourg, some eyes at least have been turned towards Iran’s Jina Revolution, which had otherwise been relegated to the category of last year’s news. The European Parliament gave their annual human rights award, the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, to “Jina Mahsa Amini and the Woman, Life, Freedom Movement in Iran”. It was Jina Amini’s death at the hands of the “morality police” for wearing her hijab “improperly” that launched the mass protests that spread out from her native Rojhelat (Iranian Kurdistan) to impact the whole country. Her parents and brother, who have resisted all attempts by the Iranian regime to force them to deny the cause of her death, were refused permission to leave Iran at the last minute, so she was represented at the ceremony by the family’s lawyer, Saleh Nikbakht, who read out a powerful statement by Jina’s mother, and made sure that Jina was remembered as a Kurd. I asked him how the situation has changed since Jina’s death, and he told me, “There are two ways to address this. In terms of repression against people and of state security the situation is worse. But, after Jina’s martyrdom, the resistance of the people against the regime is bigger and stronger.” He himself is a living embodiment of that statement. He has been informed that he has been given a year’s prison sentence for representing the Amini family, and he doesn’t know what is in store for him when he returns to Iran, but he is [insistent](#) that he will return there and continue the struggle.

Also receiving the award on behalf of the Woman Life Freedom Movement were two women, now in exile, whose lives were irrevocably changed by the protests. Afsoon Najafi lost her sister – the girl in the viral video shown tying up her hair before going to her last fatal protest. Mersedeh Shahinkar was shot in the eye. Their description of their experiences showed how emotional anger at a great injustice can combine with the invigorating power of a mass movement to transform people into fearless protestors.

The Sakharov Prize, which began in 1988, has been awarded three times to Kurdish women – an indication of both their oppression and their resilience. Before Jina Amini this year, the 2016 award was given to two Yazidi survivors of ISIS sexual slavery, Nadia Murad and Lamiya Aji Bashar; and the 1995

award was given to Kurdish politician, Leyla Zana, who was imprisoned by the Turkish state.

Turkey

Leyla Zana provoked an uproar in Turkey's nationalist establishment when she added a phrase to her oath as a new member of the Turkish Parliament in 1991. She said in Kurdish, "I take this oath for the brotherhood between the Turkish people and the Kurdish people." She was to pay for this with over nine years in prison.

This week, one of the co-chairs of the pro-Kurdish leftist DEM Party, Tuncer Bakırhan, opened his budget debate speech in Kurdish. He was made to translate what he had said into Turkish by the Speaker, and the leader of the Far-Right Nationalist Movement Party [gave](#) an angry response.

Devlet Bahçeli's anger is easily raised, but Kurdish MPs, and MPs sympathetic to Kurdish rights, continue to face severe oppression through the increasingly politicised courts. There have been hundreds of summary [requests](#) for the lifting of MPs' political immunity – and 512 of the 733 total concern members of the DEM Party. Each MP can have many summonses, and although the procedure may not be carried through, it hangs over the accused MP as a threat. Charges range from membership in a terrorist organisation, to insulting the president.

DEM Party is a new shortening as the previous short name chosen by the party – HEDEP – was not accepted by the Turkish authorities.

They [claimed](#) that it was too similar to the short name, HADEP, used by an earlier incarnation of the party that had been banned by the courts in 2003. Kurdish parties have to be prepared for a constant stream of judicial attacks. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is still fighting charges calling for its closure, and the uncertainty surrounding its survival forced party members to compete in the recent elections under the banner of one of the HDP's constituent parts, the Green Left. After the election, the Green Left took on the mantle of the HDP and changed its name to the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party – Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi, in Turkish,

abbreviated to HEDEP. That long name was accepted and still stands, but the short version, as noted, is now DEM Party. Dem is short for democracy, of course, but in Kurdish it means time, as in, it is time for political change.

All these judicial attacks are designed to tie the parties concerned up in knots, wasting their energy and making it harder for them to be recognised by voters.

The next elections in Turkey are for regional governments and will take place in March. Electioneering has already started, and there is much talk of possible deals between different parties. For the last regional elections, the HDP chose not to field a mayoral candidate in the big cities outwith the Kurdish areas, including Istanbul and Ankara; and HDP voters enabled the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) to oust the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in both those cities. But the new CHP mayors did not acknowledge their debt, nor do anything for their Kurdish voters. The HDP also supported the CHP candidate for the presidency in May, and were horrified to learn that he had made a secret deal with a far-right party before the second-round vote that would have put that party in charge of the vital interior ministry and intelligence services. This time, if there are any voting agreements involving the DEM Party, the party is clear that everything must be in the open and acknowledged by all involved.

On Wednesday, the leader of the CHP [paid a goodwill visit](#) to the co-chairs of the DEM Party. Afterwards, they all stressed the importance of dialogue between opposition parties, but whether this will lead to anything more with respect to the election it is too early to tell. Of course, for the DEM Party election wins are only part of the story. After the last two regional elections, most Kurdish mayors were removed by the state-appointed governors and replaced by non-elected "trustees".

Sometimes, attacks on Kurdish politicians go even further. Last Monday, in a village in Şırnak Province, Ahmet Gün, a local councillor and party executive, was fatally attacked by a group of armed men, and his son, Abdurrahim, was hospitalised. Four attackers have been identified, and two are members of the paramilitary Village Guards. This was not the first attempt on Gün's life, and friends are [convinced](#) this was a state-sponsored murder.

Kurds see the epicentre of their oppression and of Turkish authoritarianism as the imprisonment and isolation of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan; and the campaign for Öcalan's release is at the centre of Kurdish resistance. Öcalan has now had no contact with the world outside his prison for over 32 months, and this campaign continues to intensify. Last week was Öcalan book day, with readings from his works in many different places across the world. The next action will [involve](#) a hundred thousand post cards.

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