

The return of ISIS? – a weekly news review

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The United States is worried about Turkey's planned invasion of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. They are concerned it will lead to the revival of ISIS. US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, Dana Stroul, told a forum, organised by the Middle East Institute in Washington, "We strongly oppose any Turkish operation into northern Syria, and have made clear our objections to Turkey, specifically because ISIS is going to take advantage of that campaign." The ISIS prisoners, for whom the world has refused to take responsibility, give especial cause for concern, particularly after the breakout in Hasakah last January. Stroul noted that, "ISIS views the detention facilities where its fighters are housed as the population to reconstitute its army. And it looks at al Hol and al Roj and the youth in these

camps as the next generation of ISIS.” As Stroul points out, the vulnerability of the prisons and detention camps, and the possibility of ISIS resurgence, should be matters of global concern, and this is a point that needs to be stressed. However, her comments are chilling, not only in their emphasis on this risk, but also in their almost complete disregard for the fate of the people living in the region – people who have all lost family members in the fight against ISIS, and who supply the fighters and leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose vital role she repeatedly acknowledges.

Stroul makes clear that the US-led coalition forces are there “only to support the de-ISIS campaign”, and that the SDF is only important so long as they are useful for US interests. Commenting on a potential Turkish invasion, she explained that “at this point” the US opposes such an operation because of concerns over the protection of coalition forces and of reversing the gains against ISIS. And she observed that, “If there are military operations that would cause the SDF to focus on moving north to protect their communities from an air campaign or a ground campaign, there’s only so many SDF to go around, so they are going to deprioritise what WE care about.”

Stroul is concerned that these pressures will push the SDF “into the hands of our adversaries”, i.e. Damascus and Moscow. And the SDF are, indeed, making defensive agreements, as I discussed last week. However, she still treats Turkey as an ally with whom they will continue to work to counter “PKK activity in Iraq and Syria”.

Yesterday, Mazloum Abdi, the SDF’s Commander in Chief, told a press conference that Turkey’s threats directly affected “the concentration of our forces and diverted them from the war against ISIS,” and directly target “the efforts of the coalition and the international community against ISIS in the region”. He stressed that while the SDF had kept to the 2019 ceasefire agreements, Turkey violated them every day, and that the Turkish occupied areas provide a safe haven for ISIS.

On Tuesday, a US drone carried out a targeted attack that killed the leader of ISIS in Syria, Maher al-Agal, and fatally wounded another senior member of ISIS who was with him. North Press Agency describes al-Agal as “one of the

architects of the ISIS ideology before it took control of the region in 2014.” And “one of those responsible” for the suicide bomb that killed 33 young socialists in Suruç in 2015 as they were preparing to help children in Kobanê.

Like previous ISIS leaders killed by the Americans, al-Agal was based in northwest Syria – in one of the parts occupied by Turkey. The Rojava Information Centre reports that, “At least 1 of the [dead] men was carrying an ID card under a false name provided by the local council. Both men were reportedly tied to the Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia, part of the Turkish-backed SNA. The high-profile killings are the clearest sign yet that ISIS is free to operate in Turkish-occupied Syria, though far from the first... Both Idlib & Turkish-held Syria have been deemed a ‘sanctuary’ for ISIS, & one of their main sources of funding, by the US mission in Syria.”

North Press Agency spoke with an expert on the use of false documentation in northern Syria, and reported that, “Such IDs are linked to Turkish records in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, and are only granted after carrying out extensive security studies by Turkish intelligence... the majority of ISIS leaders in areas in northwestern Syria run by Turkey and its affiliated SNA factions use similar IDs to move freely in the region. Those IDs are granted by visiting the statistics office of the local council of al-Bab, a Turkish-occupied city in northern Syria”.

Farhad Shami, of the SDF’s media centre, commented, “The Turkish State is trying to deceive the public opinion, demonstrating that it is fighting terrorism while ISIS training camps are located before the eyes of Turkish intelligence in the border areas of Belbala & Rajo, Afrin. The relationship between Turkey and ISIS has become grossly obvious and it is time for the international community to hold Turkey accountable for harboring and supporting ISIS terrorists who are holding IDs issued by Turkish intelligence.”

Also on Tuesday, the SDF announced the capture of an ISIS sleeper cell of twelve militants, and the foiling of a plan to get ISIS families out of al Hol camp and take them to the Turkish-occupied regions. The SDF work hard to reduce the threat from ISIS, but so long as the region is prevented from

providing its residents with physical and economic security, this is an uphill task as ISIS will continue to recruit more fighters. Turkey not only provides ISIS with safe havens, but also ensures, through its constant attacks and threats, that stability remains a distant dream.

Voice of America reports that there are still an estimated six to sixteen thousand ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq, mostly organised in small remote cells. They quote White House deputy homeland security adviser, Joshua Geltzer, who states that “It is a group that at least in small pockets right now continues to exercise or at least attempt to exercise some territorial control.” And they note that “Geltzer said [ISIS] has taken credit for at least 350 attacks in Syria and Iraq already this year, and that there is also evidence [ISIS] leadership in Syria and Iraq is still able to exert influence over its affiliates around the world and share financial resources.”

Although history has given ISIS an especially gruesome resonance, it is far from unique in its use of Islam to attempt to justify brutalisation and misogyny. For those living in the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria, where mercenary militias hold sway, the distinction between these militias and ISIS may seem academic – and, indeed, the militias have incorporated former ISIS fighters.

The Russian factor

Since Donald Trump’s partial withdrawal of US troops in 2019, which allowed Turkey’s last invasion into Syria, Russia has been the dominant power in the areas that Turkey now threatens to attack. There are Russian military bases, and Russia controls the airspace; and, according to Dana Stroul, the war in Ukraine has not resulted in any diminution of Russian involvement in Syria. A major Turkish attack would need Russian agreement.

Last week, I wrote about a developing tactical defence agreement between the SDF, and Syrian, Russian and Iranian forces. This week has seen reports of more Syrian and Russian forces arriving north of Manbij, of more Russian forces in Sarin military airport near Kobanê, and of flights by Russian planes and helicopters. However, there has also been speculation about possible

deals when the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey meet in Tehran next Tuesday. The only certainty is that each of them will be guided solely by their own interests. The war in Ukraine brings a new dynamic that Turkey has proved adept at exploiting, and they are currently boosting their international profile through their role in ongoing talks to enable vital Ukrainian grain exports.

Referring to the Tehran meeting, Mazloun Abdi said yesterday, “we believe that other parties will not allow Turkish forces to launch their attacks against our areas”. He stressed that the SDF do not want war but are ready to resist and have nowhere to retreat to, and that this is a battle for the entire north of Syria where Turkey will first face the forces of the Syrian government.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The United States may be concerned about Turkish plans to invade Syria, but they are fully behind Turkey’s ongoing invasion of northern Iraq, and ready to accept this as a “counter terrorism” operation against the PKK, although it is clear that the Turkish bases are there to stay. Reports from the PKK’s guerrillas stress the huge amount of weaponry being directed at them, including chemical weapons, while the dearth of reports from the Turkish side, suggests that this is not producing the breakthrough that President Erdoğan is looking for. The PKK claim that Turkey hides the deaths of its own soldiers and often doesn’t attempt to retrieve their bodies. The guerrillas have offered to deliver the body of a Turkish Special Forces soldier directly to his family.

While Turkey is receiving active support from the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which would rather allow Turkey to take over large parts of their hard-won autonomous region than allow any space for the PKK, others are far from happy with the KDP’s position. Last Saturday, as many as eighty people were rounded up and detained in Duhok, and although no official statement was given, it is believed that this was a response to their opposition to the Turkish invasion.

A further example of KDP intolerance was provided by the expulsion of Dutch journalist, Frédérique Geerdink, who writes for Medya News and was taken by police car to Erbil airport when she was about to cross into Syria for a story.

While the KDP works hand in glove with Turkey, the chairman of the Water Resources Committee in the Iraqi parliament has protested that Turkish plans to dam the River Tigris will completely cut off this vital water supply from Iraq. They would also impact Eastern Syria.

Inside Turkey

Part of Turkey's official rhetoric in support of their planned invasion is that it will allow the repatriation of Syrian refugees. As has been pointed out many times, these plans are predicated on the ethnic cleansing of existing inhabitants, the refugees would not be returning home as most come from other parts of Syria, and Syria is not currently considered safe to return to. However, as a new article in Foreign Policy shows, support for refugee return is now extremely high among voters for all Turkey's political parties and is set to be a key election issue. Rising costs of living, falling wages, and the highest refugee population in the world, provide fertile ground for anti-refugee mobilisation, which has long been exploited by the mainstream opposition, and has now been turbo-charged by the new populist ultra-right party led by the deliberately provocative Ümit Özdağ. Özdağ has made immigration his central issue, and he regards Kurds as dangerous outsiders ready to take over Turkey, too.

While official Turkey made much of yesterday's sixth anniversary of the attempted coup against Erdoğan, this week also provided annual reminders of the long history of persecution faced by the country's large Kurdish population. On Wednesday, Kurds remembered the anniversary of the Zilan Massacre of 1930. At this time, Kurds were rebelling against the government's aggressive anti-Kurdish policies. The Turkish army entered Van's Zilan valley and gunned down everyone in sight, old and young alike. This was a deliberate extermination of mainly non-combatants that left 15,000 dead.

And on Thursday, it was the 40th anniversary of the beginning of the hunger strike in Diyarbakir's notorious Prison No. 5 that ended with the deaths of leading PKK members Kemal Pir, Mehmet Hayri Durmuş, Akif Yılmaz and Ali Çiçek. As Firat News Agency explains, "This action is considered the 'first spark of resistance' and was not only directed against the conditions in the prisons, but was also a revolutionary sign to the people beyond the prison walls". Predictably, an anniversary commemoration planned to take place at Ali Çiçek's grave was banned, and the cemetery cordoned off.

That early resistance evolved into a civil war that is still going on, though it rarely makes the news. A week ago, women guerrillas attacked two police stations in Yüksekova, in the province of Hakkari, and, starting on Thursday, Turkish military operations in Bitlis resulted in a three-day curfew over three villages. This war is also being carried out against the beloved Kurdish landscape. In the name of security, the government systematically strips mountains of their forests, destroying eco-systems and local livelihoods. Lawyers have been arguing against a massacre of nature in Şırnak, where cutting has gone on for almost two years and where the last seven months saw a 7% reduction in forest cover, with fifteen trucks of wood leaving the region every day. The lawyers' case has been rejected by the courts and they are now taking it to the ombudsman and appealing – so far without success – to international organisations.

While today's prisons are different from the hell of 1980s Diyarbakir, torture and mistreatment are a growing problem, and isolation adds a new dimension of cruelty. This week, it was reported that the Kurdish journalists held on remand since 16 June have had their letters seized, while their visitors have been forced to strip to their underwear before going through security x-rays.

Of course, the picture presented to the Turkish public is very different from that given above. A story published last Saturday about one of the "Diyarbakir Mothers" exposed the cynical and corrupt workings of government propaganda. Ruken Canbey had become a well-known face representing the people who protest outside the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) headquarters, claiming that their child or other relative had been kidnapped by

the party and forced to join the PKK. Although PKK recruits have explained that they joined of their own volition, the Turkish government holds much store by these protests, and ensures they are well attended through a mixture of bullying and bribery. Canbey had been rewarded with a job in the municipality, which is run by a government-appointed trustee. But, recently, she was told that her turn was up, and a member of another protesting family was appointed in her stead. Now she is telling everyone about this mistreatment.

Turkey in the world

Meanwhile, in western Europe, the issue of Sweden and Finland's NATO membership is far from resolved. Last Saturday, Swedish protestors expressed their anger at their government's agreement to clamp down on the Kurds in exchange for Turkey lifting their veto on Sweden joining NATO. They marched through Stockholm, flags flying – and were totally ignored by the Swedish media. The Swedish Solidarity Committee for Rojava claims that the memorandum as signed does not actually change any law, but that is not the interpretation put on it by Turkey, which can still refuse final ratification of the Nordic nations' NATO membership. Turkey also claims that concessions have been made beyond those set down in the memorandum. Turkey's Head of Communications, Fahrettin Altun, implied that the memorandum defined the Peoples Protection Units (YPG), and also supporters of Fethullah Gülen, as terrorists alongside the PKK, but this is not the case. And President Erdoğan told the press that Sweden had promised 73 extraditions, which a government with an independent judiciary is not in a position to arrange. There are claims that some extraditions have already taken place, but it is not clear if the decisions were made after the memorandum or before.

Germany seems so eager to keep Turkey happy that they are ready to forget international law. In response to Turkish demands for his extradition, they detained a young Kurdish man, Yaser Örnek, for ten days, before accepting, in the face of public protests, that his refugee status in Switzerland gave him the right to travel anywhere in the Schengen area. Had he been sent

back to Turkey, he would have been imprisoned for a “terrorist” conviction based on his democratic student activism with the HDP.

More positively, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg has confirmed their ruling on the illegality of Turkey’s imprisonment of the philanthropist, Osman Kavala. This allows the case to move onto the next stage of the long slow process that could result in Turkey facing restrictions on their rights within the Council, or even exclusion from the Council altogether. The aim must be to apply meaningful sanctions without totally excluding Turkey and depriving Turkish citizens of future redress in the court.

And, finally, a cross-party vote in the US House of Representatives has supported the amendment submitted by Greek-origin Democrat, Chris Pappas, and put a block on President Biden’s plans to approve the sale of F16 jets to Turkey.