

# The world is silent as Turkey prepares a new offensive against the Kurds – a weekly news review

Turkey has announced that they will launch a new offensive against the Kurds in Iraq and that they still plan to take control of a 30-40 km corridor in Syria, but the world says nothing. Meanwhile, Turkish ministers have been trying to get wider support for these attacks. They have persuaded Iraq to define the PKK as a “banned organisation”, and they have got the United States to ignore reality and describe Turkey as a country committed to the fight against ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Meanwhile Turkey continues to destroy the environment and breach human rights, and international organisations produce reports but no action.

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**Sarah Glynn**

Sometime after the local elections (31 March) and after the end of Ramadan (10 April) Turkey will launch a new offensive against the Kurds in Iraq. And

Turkey continues to have its eyes on northern Syria. The Turkish government has announced this to Turkish voters and to the world – dressed up as a security issue – but the world has said nothing.

Twelve days ago, President Erdoğan [claimed](#), “We are about to complete the circle that will secure our Iraqi borders. Hopefully, this summer, we will have permanently resolved the issue regarding our Iraqi borders. Our will to create a security corridor 30-40 kilometres deep along our Syrian borders remains intact. We have preparations that will give new nightmares to those who think that they will bring Turkey to its knees with a ‘Terroristan’ along its southern borders.”

[Ertuğrul Kürkçü](#), Honorary President of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), argues that this aggression against Kurds over the borders in Iraq and Syria is tied to anti-Kurdish policies within Turkey, both political and military. That “Every inward-looking step of the international strategy followed by [Foreign Minister Hakan] Fidan will inevitably aim to interrupt the political march of the Kurdish people that brings them together with the democratic and libertarian dynamics of other peoples, and to isolate the democratic liberation option represented by the HDP [now the DEM Party].” And that “the translation of [Erdoğan’s] strategy... into the social life of Kurdistan will be a de facto military exclusion zone south and north of the Turkish-Iraqi border, with an estimated depth of 20-30 km on both sides – perhaps deeper on the Iraqi side – and that Hakkari and Şırnak [on the Turkish side] will be the target of military and psychological operations due to the socio-political significance they have gained as centres of power for Kurdistan patriotism.”

Erdoğan’s boast comes at a time of election campaigning and after the Turkish army has had to admit to significant losses of Turkish soldiers at the hands of the PKK guerrillas. Turkey’s recent operations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have seen them establish scores of military bases, but they have failed to dislodge the PKK from their guerrilla strongholds dug deep into the mountains. In preparation for a new operation, Turkish ministers have been trying to cajole and bully wider support for their plans.

The Barzanis and their Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government and controls Erbil and Duhok – already behave as Turkey’s vassals, and actively support Turkey’s occupation of their own “autonomous” region. But Turkey has also been attempting to win over the Iraqi government; to force compliance from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – the other main party in the Kurdistan Regional Government, which controls Sulaymaniyah; and to ensure acquiescence from the United States.

The anticipation of imminent danger is summed up by this tweet from the journalist [Amed Dicle](#), put out on Thursday: “[Foreign Minister] Hakan Fidan, [Defence Minister] Yaşar Güler and [intelligence chief] Ibrahim Kalın, the head of MIT, travelled to Baghdad again today. Last month, the three of them travelled to Baghdad and Erbil one after the other. Then to the US and then again to Baghdad. Military build-up along the border continues. For the attack on Gare, 161 villages were evacuated with the KDP. A big war starts from April.”

### **The Government of Iraq**

Turkey’s operations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq violate Iraqi sovereignty, displace local inhabitants, and bring civilian casualties. Turkey tries to persuade Iraq that if they helped them eliminate the PKK, then all this would stop. The Iraqi government has protested Turkish attacks in the past – especially the attack that killed several Arab tourists – and Iraq’s pro-Iranian parties are wary of conceding more power to Turkey, but Iraq does not have the strength or cohesion to confront Turkey.

For the Iraqi Government, Turkey has both a stick and a carrot. Turkey is upstream from Iraq (and also from Syria) with power to restrict the flow of vital river waters and use more than their agreed share. They control over 90% of the water in the Euphrates and 44% of water in the Tigris. Water disputes have gone on for decades but are now at a new intensity. This is partly due to climate change and to growing demands from agriculture and an increasing population, but water is also being used as a deliberate – and illegal – weapon of war and political power. Since the beginning of 2021, Turkey has cut the

amount of water flowing in the Euphrates to Syria – and on to Iraq – to half the agreed amount.

Besides controlling the water that goes into Iraq, Turkey also has the power to turn off the tap for a large part of the oil that flows out. Oil from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and also, previously, from Kirkuk – was exported by pipeline through Turkey. No oil has flowed through that pipeline since the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris ruled that oil exports from the Kurdistan Region fell under the control of the Federal Government, and that the export agreement made between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government was illegal. Turkey has refused to pay Iraq the compensation demanded by the court, and has closed the pipeline to further exports.

Iraq has strong economic ties with Turkey, and for the carrot – a carrot that has also been chosen to bring huge benefits to themselves – Turkey has plans for building a major road and rail link from the Gulf states through Iraq to the eastern Turkish ports that export to Europe. This would rival plans for the proposed route from India via UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Middle East Eye [observes](#). “The Iraqi government envisions trains operating at speeds of up to 300km per hour, facilitating the transportation of both passengers and goods. Additionally, plans include the establishment of logistic hubs, industrial complexes and the potential integration of oil and gas pipelines. This ambitious scheme is estimated to require an investment of around \$17bn, with projected annual returns of \$4bn and the creation of a minimum of 100,000 jobs.”

The Iraq Development Road Project, to give it its official name, would pass through the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including areas where the PKK has important bases that Turkey wants gone.

The last weeks have seen a flurry of ministerial meetings between Turkey and Iraq. On Thursday, leading Turkish ministers were in Bagdad to continue discussions begun when Iraqi ministers came to Ankara in December. On the day of the meeting, the [Kurdistan Communities Union \(KCK\)](#), the umbrella body for all the organisations that follow Öcalan’s philosophy, including the PKK, put out a statement and call to the Iraqi government. They argued that

“the biggest security threat to Iraq is the fascist regime of Turkey”, and that Erdoğan “has never denied his intentions to invade and occupy a certain part of Iraq, openly claiming ownership over Kirkuk and Mosul.” And they pointed out that the PKK, who are portrayed as a threat, defended Iraqi people against ISIS, while “it is the Turkish state which has invaded and occupied Iraqi territory, constructed hundreds of temporary as well as permanent bases there, deploying tens of thousands of soldiers, and is using fighter planes and drones to target a different part of Iraqi territory every day...” But the KCK, unlike Turkey, is not backed up by NATO’s second biggest army, and the Iraqi government doesn’t want to listen.

After the December meeting, Iraq agreed to describe the PKK as a “common threat”. Now they have been persuaded to define it as a “banned organization”. The [joint statement](#) put out by Turkey and Iraq after the meeting glides over Turkey’s effective military occupation of large parts of the Kurdistan region and records, “During the meetings, the importance attached to Iraq’s political unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity was emphasized. The two sides also stressed that the PKK organization represents a security threat to both Turkey and Iraq, and it is certain that the presence of this organization on the Iraqi territory represents a violation of the Iraqi constitution. Turkey welcomed the Iraqi National Security Council’s decision to consider the PKK a banned organization in Iraq, the two sides consulted on the measures to be taken against the organization and its banned extensions that target Turkey through Iraq’s territory.” It is planned that Erdoğan will visit Bagdad after Ramadan.

## **The PUK**

The PUK has described allegations that they aid the PKK as “baseless” and have stated that “The [PUK](#) has not invited the PKK to the Kurdistan Region and does not wish for their presence to pose a threat to the Turkish border”. However, PUK leader, [Bafel Talabani](#), has explicitly stated that “The Kurdistan Workers’ Party is not our enemy”, and the party spokesperson has observed that Turkey “can resolve its issues with the PKK without resorting to violence”. PUK peşmerga have worked alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) –

as well as the United States – in the fight against ISIS cells, and for this they have come under direct and fatal attack from Turkey. Turkey has also attempted to put pressure on the PUK by blocking air access to Sulaymaniyah Airport.

### **President Assad**

When it comes to Syria, Turkey has met with no success in their attempt to persuade President Assad that the Kurds are the most significant threat to his power, and that Syria and Turkey should work together to eliminate the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Assad has no tolerance for autonomy, nor for the American troops that are based within the Administration's boundaries, but his first requirement from any deal with Turkey is Turkish withdrawal from the parts of Syria that they occupy, and this Turkey has not been prepared to offer.

Turkish attempts to woo Assad have not prevented them from deliberately destroying Syrian infrastructure, and, as we have seen, they have devastated the facilities needed for normal life in Autonomous North and East Syria. No-one has stopped them – not the Americans and not the Russians, though both are supposed to be guarantors of Turkey's 2019 ceasefire agreements.

### **The United States**

Turkey has been pursuing their diplomacy with America and Russia too. On 8 March, Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Washington, where, according to the joint statement following the meeting, Blinken "reiterated the United States' condemnation of the PKK terrorist organization, DHKP-C [The Revolutionary People's Liberation Party/Front], as well as ISIS/DAESH targeting Türkiye and Turkish interests. The United States and Türkiye reiterated their shared commitment to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS/DAESH in Syria and Iraq and [discussed](#) cooperation to counter the threat of ISIS/DAESH and al-Qa'ida affiliates present in Africa and Central Asia."

The Brussels-based [Kurdistan National Congress](#) (KNK), which represents Kurdish political parties and organisations, has responded with an attempt to set the record – and Blinken – straight: “We cannot and do not accept these allegations concerning the PKK in any way or this fanciful account of the Turkish state fighting against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group...The reality, [acknowledged] by many in the US government and military, is that, during the rise of ISIS, the Turkish state and their intelligence agency, the MIT, led at the time by Mr. Fidan himself, armed, assisted, and weaponized ISIS as their own proxy mercenaries against the Kurds in Rojava/North and East Syria and South Kurdistan (Iraq).”

The KNK back their arguments with quotes from Brett McGurk, who served as the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS; and they remind Blinken of the PKK’s role in defeating ISIS as well as of Turkey’s continued support for ex-ISIS fighters and al-Qaida derivative, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

### **Turkey’s threats in a world context**

Turkey has publicly broadcast plans that, if they were to succeed, would suffocate Kurdish culture and Kurdish existence, and end experiments in a more social and caring society that have inspired people across the world. But there has been almost nothing in mainstream media and political debate, and most of the world has no idea of what is threatened.

People might also be forgiven for thinking that with all the troubles in the world they can’t cope with worrying about more problems; however, seemingly local issues are not isolated things. They are the products of interlinked forces and international and global changes. What happens in one place affects others, and how the world reacts to one issue affects others too. The Kurdish Freedom Movement is part of a more general struggle against the forces of capitalism and imperialism that are also tearing apart Palestine, hollowing out social services, and ultimately destroying our planet.



## **Turkish environmental destruction**

It is no accident that the governments that are the most exploitative of people and [dismissive](#) of human rights are also the most exploitative and destructive of the environment. Numerous reports testify to the Turkish government's abuse of nature. Just this last week, we could read that: Police prevented environmental activists from entering the Godernê Valley in Diyarbakir's Kulp District to protest environmental and cultural destruction caused by the Silvan Dam and other projects. Erdoğan [approved](#) the appropriation of agricultural land for the expansion of a lignite mine in Muğla Province that has been the centre of clashes between local people supported by environmentalists on one side, and big industry with ties to government on the other.

Alarm has been [raised](#) that work has restarted on a hydroelectric project in the beautiful Solaklı valley in Trabzon Province – a project that was halted ten years ago following an environmental impact assessment. And, despite these destructive dams, a new report shows that whereas coal use in electric generation in Europe has [dropped](#) from 25% to 12% since 2013, in Turkey it has gone up from 25% to 36%.

## **Continued Turkish attacks**

Even as Kurds brace themselves for the [promised](#) major operation, Turkey continues their constant low-level war. In Duhok, Turkish airstrikes killed two men and wounded two others as they gathered vegetables in the mountains. And in the Yazidi homeland of Şengal, a drone [killed](#) a member of the Yazidi defence force, the Şengal Resistance Units.

## **Within Turkey**

From Turkey itself come more reports of detentions, [including](#) of DEM Party members and mayoral candidates who were attempting to read from a leaflet calling for participation in the Newroz celebration in Kadıköy on 21 March.



Brindar Gezici, a member of the DEM Party's Youth Council, was detained at his home and tortured for two days before being arrested and sent to prison. After visiting him in the prison his sister [reported](#), "My brother was detained in Doğubayazıt and tortured so badly on the way that he fell unconscious. At the police station, water was poured over his head and he regained consciousness. There he was beaten again with an iron bar by soldiers and village guards. Finally, his fingers were crushed with pliers. He was battered on his head, legs and nose several times with a rifle. When I visited him, he could barely stand on his feet."

The latest accounts of the mistreatment of political prisoners include cell raids where books and personal notebooks are [confiscated](#), and extra punishments for prisoners on hunger strike against the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. These prisoners are themselves "given 'communication' penalties and placed in solitary confinement for a month, deprived of access to newspapers, television, radio and even books".

Four Kurdish politicians have been [sentenced](#) to prison on "terrorism" charges, including Aysel Tuğluk who suffers from dementia and can no longer look after herself.

In a reminder of how endemic anti-Kurdishness has become, a mayoral candidate from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has [claimed](#) – to the embarrassment of her party leader – that if elected she will exclude the DEM party from the municipality. Meanwhile, the DEM Party itself is campaigning on its record of resistance to all attempts to close it down, which has [resulted](#) in many party name changes and reincarnations. Their new slogan states, "From HEP [the People's Labour Party] to DEM, the journey for freedom continues".

## **International organisations**

Last week saw the publication of the [report](#) by the United Nations Fact-Finding Mission on Iran, and this week saw the [publication](#) of the Council of Europe's

“Memorandum on freedom of expression and of the media, human rights defenders and civil society in Türkiye”.

Both are damning documents, but this only highlights the inability of these international institutions to do more than comment.

This week’s meeting of the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers was a forum where action could have been taken with respect to the cases of [Selahattin Demirtaş](#) and [Osman Kavala](#), and Turkey’s refusal to comply with the European Court of Human Rights and release them. The ministers have the power to impose sanctions on Turkey’s role within the Council (and even to throw Turkey out though this would remove them entirely from the court’s jurisdiction). Instead, they have again kicked the ball into the long grass and refused to venture beyond strong-sounding words.

### **Anniversaries and commemorations**

This has been a week of commemorations. International women’s day, a week ago on Friday, is an important date in the calendar of the Kurdish women’s revolution. Tuesday was the 20th [anniversary](#) of mass protests in Qamishlo against Assad’s Syrian Government. Yesterday was the anniversary of the beginning, in 2011, of the unfinished Syrian [revolution](#), and today is the anniversary of Saddam Hussein’s devastating gas attack in 1988 on the Kurdish city of Halabja, which was part of his much bigger Kurdish genocide. Next Thursday is the spring equinox, and festivities are already beginning for the Kurdish new year – Newroz. Newroz has been made symbolic of Kurdish resistance – a resistance that has fortified Kurds against attacks from all directions, and that is being put to the test yet again.

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