

# Erdoğan's war for votes – a weekly news review

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For Turkey's President Erdoğan, every problem merits the same solution: launch an aggressive military campaign and blame the Kurds. If that campaign is against the Kurds, so much the better. As support for his Justice and Development Party (AKP) government plummets, along with the value of the Turkish Lira, and a struggling economy with rising inflation leaves households struggling and people drained of hope, this week's bellicose statements directed at North and East Syria were sadly predictable. It need not have been this way. Between 2013 and 2015, peace talks with Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) offered a window of opportunity and optimism. But, since Erdoğan ended the peace talks in response to HDP election success and the Kurdish victory over ISIS in Kobanê,

he has dug himself into a hole of perpetual war, and at every setback, his response has been to keep on digging. He aims to fuel a surge of anti-Kurdish nationalism, and to use war conditions to hem in opposition forces and centre himself as national leader.

The resilience of the PKK guerrillas has ensured that Turkey's attempts to expand their military occupation in the mountains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has failed to bring Erdoğan the rallying victory that he craves, so the Turkish military is resorting to a systematic use of chemical weapons to attempt to suffocate the guerrillas in their rock-cut tunnels. And now, Erdoğan is attempting to manufacture a case for further Turkish aggression against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. I will concentrate this week on the Turkish threats against Syria, but I want to begin with their growing use of chemical weapons, which has been enabled by an almost total lack of international response and censor.

The PKK is reporting daily chemical attacks, with gas forced directly into tunnel entrances and gas bombs lowered down on ropes. Since 20 September, they have reported bigger explosions and new types of gas. The chemical attacks have also affected local residents – those who have tried to remain with their homes and land despite the fighting. In an area close to Turkish attacks, 548 people had to go to hospital with 'excessive tearing of the eyes, blurred vision, sudden headaches, nosebleeds, difficulty in breathing and rashes'. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government and is dependent on Turkish support, has tried to limit knowledge of what is happening, even, it is claimed, threatening to punish village headmen if they speak out about the attacks.

In contrast to the international outcry over reports of chemical weapon use by the Syrian regime, use of chemical weapons by NATO-member Turkey has gone almost unremarked. Swedish MEP, Malin Björk, raised concerns in a written question to the EU Commission, but this was brushed off in the reply by High Representative Josep Borrell. Die Linke's Gökay Akbulut has also put a written question into the German parliament – answer awaited.

Every day sees the Turkish government and its mercenary militias break the ceasefires negotiated by Washington and Russia that ended Turkey's last major attack on North and East Syria. Just over a week ago, in the approach to the second anniversary of the launch of that attack, a spokesperson for North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) claimed that in those two years Tel Tamr, Zeran and Ain Aissa had come under 433 ground attacks with heavy weapons and drones, while the SDF had had to repel 86 attempts to advance over the ceasefire line. He claimed that the attacks were aimed at causing instability and population displacement and that they also hampered the continuing fight against ISIS. There has been no visible attempt to censor or restrain Turkey, despite protests at the lack of action outside Russian military headquarters.

Despite all these attacks, which are well-documented by the Kurdish media, Turkey is attempting to present themselves as the aggrieved party. Last Sunday, a missile hit a Turkish armoured vehicle in occupied Syria, killing two Turkish police officers and wounding three others. Munitions also hit Turkish-occupied Jarablus and an area across the Turkish border. Turkish media and the Turkish Interior Minister were quick to blame the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG), which are now incorporated into the SDF.

On Monday a car bomb exploded in Afrîn. People on the ground reported that it "was coming from the city of Idlib from the areas controlled by HTS [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham] and was monitored by several cameras and was destined to detonate a building containing members of Jaysh al-Islam of the Turkish occupation forces" But Turkish media blamed the YPG and this was repeated by Russia's Sputnik News.

The SDF categorically deny involvement in these attacks – and have always attempted to avoid any action across the border, which would clearly be dangerously provocative. A statement made by the SDF on Friday concludes, 'Although it is the Turkish occupation that is constantly attacking our safe areas, it is trying to twist the facts by showing our forces as attackers. We call on the international public opinion, and first and foremost the Turkish people, to verify facts and expose lies.'

It will have come as no surprise when, following Monday's cabinet meeting, Erdoğan warned, "The latest attack against our police and the harassment targeting our lands have reached the bottom of the glass. We will take the necessary steps as soon as possible. We have no patience for some places that are the source of terrorist attacks against our country from Syria. We are determined to eliminate the threats arising from these places either together with the forces active there or by our own means."

Erdoğan's threat was reinforced by his Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, who told press on Wednesday, "We will do whatever is necessary to clear these regions of these terrorists." In Çavuşoğlu's propaganda-speak 'Each of our actions against PKK/YPG, like our actions against ISIS, is also important for Syria's border and territorial integrity.' Thus he not only equates the PKK and the Syrian-based YPG (and classifies both as terrorists) but also presents Turkey as against ISIS when they have been shown to have assisted them, and tries to portray Turkey's invasion and occupation of parts of Syria as somehow preserving Syria's territorial integrity.

As Ferda Çetin explains in Yeni Özgür Politika, the current rhetoric is very similar to that used by Turkey before their last invasion. The target this time appears to be Tel Rifat. Russia has been putting pressure on Turkey to keep their agreement to withdraw from Idlib and the adjacent M4 highway, and the suggestion is that they could allow Turkey to move into Tel Rifat in exchange. Turkey has already built up their troops in the area.

What happens will depend on whether Russia and the United States allow Turkey access to the airspace. Both want to keep Turkey on side. Russia, as allies of the Syrian regime, does not want to see more of the country under Turkish occupation. They have used Turkish pressure as a tool to force concessions from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but in recent weeks, Russian forces have increasingly targeted Turkish-occupied areas. After Donald Trump's withdrawal of US troops allowed the last Turkish invasion and produced widespread accusations of the betrayal of the Kurds, the withdrawal was partially reversed. The 900 US troops now in the region are expected to function as a guarantee against further invasion, but it

hasn't stopped the constant low-level attacks. Both the US and Russia allowed the 2018 invasion of Afrîn.

The military alliance between the United States and the SDF has provided a major source of tension between the US and Turkey, and the US has never given whole-hearted support to the Kurds. Asked about Erdoğan's threat, the State Department spokesperson, Ned Price, told the press that they 'condemn[ed] the cross-border attack against our NATO Ally, Turkey', and observed – in an example of the dangers of false equivalence – “It is crucial for all sides to maintain and to respect ceasefire zones.”

In an interview with Mezopotamya News Agency, Hişyar Özsoy, Foreign Affairs co-spokesperson for the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), injected a more optimistic note, “Turkey may soon find the USA and Russia against its policies that prolong this war and deepen the contradictions. Syrian authorities have begun to speak loudly for Turkey to leave the region. It seems that there is an agreement between the great powers in Syria. This has significantly reduced Turkey's range of action,” “We must hope that, this time, diplomats are working hard for a peaceful solution.

With Turkey's previous incursions into Syria, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was an enthusiastic cheerleader, but the pro-Kurdish, leftist HDP have been quick to make public condemnation of Erdoğan's threats. HDP co-chair, Pervin Buldan, told a party meeting, “There is a power that clings to war as it loses power... The economy has collapsed, the government says war. People say elections, power says war. People say livelihood, they say war. We say; The people don't want you, they don't want your war policies.

In a timely reminder of what the Turkish occupation of Syria has brought, an Afrîn human rights organisation has announced that for the months of August and September they documented 291 abductions and five murders in occupied Afrîn.

In parallel with their external aggression, Turkey continues an internal oppression that somehow manages to keep finding new ways to inflict

cruelty. Sunday was the anniversary of the suicide bombing of a mass peace rally in Ankara in 2015. The rally was called by the HDP and Trade Unions – three weeks before the November election – to protest Turkey’s ongoing war against the Kurdish towns in the country’s south-east. The bombs killed over a hundred people and wounded over five times that number, and while blame for the actual bombing is generally agreed to lie with ISIS, the EU intelligence unit has concluded that, “Given the circumstances such as the lack of search of the buses carrying the demonstrators and the almost complete absence of police at a massive rally, there is reasonable reason to believe that the AKP forces specifically deployed Daesh militants in this case.”

Police tried to prevent people attending the commemoration of the massacre, which was held outside the railway station where the bomb went off, and people who wouldn’t be turned back were detained. One journalist who had gone to record the event reported that he was threatened by police, with one policeman declaring ‘I will cut you into four pieces’.

This week saw more round-ups of politicians and activists, and more people imprisoned. Yakup Almaç, deposed HDP co-mayor of Van’s Özalp district was sentenced to eight and a half years. Film maker, Veysi Altay, was sentenced for a year for the poster for his film on three women fighters in Kobanê, which included a YPG flag. And police raided an Ankara wedding on the grounds that some of the guests were wearing traditional Kurdish clothes. The mistreatment of prisoners is growing, with prisoners increasingly isolated. Seriously ill prisoners, such as the former mayor of Cizre, are denied medical treatment.

Meanwhile – and much more in the international public eye – there has been a general election in Iraq. Although this was held early as a concession to the major demonstrations against the government in 2019, there was little faith that it would be able to bring the needed changes, and many people did not vote. The official turnout was 41%, but many people did not even put their names on the register. This low turnout enabled the well-organised party of populist cleric Muqtada al-Sadr to make substantial gains – despite their brutal role in suppressing the 2019 protests. While Sadr is sympathetic to

Iranian religious politics, he is against any external interference in Iraq – from Iran or the US. The biggest losers in the election were the pro-Iranian groups linked to the pro-Iranian militias. Among the Kurdish parties, the KDP gained seats – though on a lower total number of votes – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – which has been undergoing internal power struggles – lost seats, Gorran, which had once posed as an alternative to the latter two, ended up with nothing, and the New Generation Movement of businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid gained seats. As before, bigger parties were able to manipulate the system that is supposed to give representation to minorities, and use it to get in candidates that they backed. Coalition negotiations are expected to take months.

The Yazidi Freedom and Democracy Party (PADÊ) has called for the Şengal result to be cancelled. They claim major problems with unrecognised registrations, polling station locations, and coercion.

This has been a worrying week for what has happened, for what could happen and – yet again – for the silence of international organisations and world powers. Last weekend, people across the world demonstrated their support on social media for Abdullah Ocalan and the Kurdish freedom movement. This support will need to be converted into action if that silence is to be broken.