

Three small victories and lots of funerals – a weekly news review

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If you are a Kurd, the Turkish state will not let you rest in peace even after you are dead. We have seen how Turkey destroys cemeteries and desecrates the bodies of Kurdish fighters so as to torture their surviving relatives – even exhuming their graves and stacking their remains in plastic boxes under a pathway.

This week, in Afrîn, Turkey attempted to use the bodies of their victims to support their lying propaganda. On Wednesday, they announced the excavation of a mass grave of people executed by the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). The story was taken up in a shallowly researched article by Agence France-Presse (AFP) and quickly travelled around the world, despite the lack of any evidence to pin the deaths on the YPG. In the oppressive chaos of Afrîn, it took a little time to get accurate information on what was going on, but the site has now been shown to be a makeshift cemetery for fighters killed in the Turkish invasion and hurriedly buried before the majority of the inhabitants fled from the brutality of the occupying forces – as seen in photographs and a video from 2018.

A statement from the Council of Martyr's families reads: "The mercenaries claim that these are mass graves, but as everyone knows and according to the published photos, the people of Afrin confirmed that this cemetery is a cemetery known as the cemetery of the martyr Avesta, and the bodies were for the martyrs of the Resistance of the Age" I Will this vital correction be taken up by the mainstream media, and will they be as keen to publish Turkey's war crimes and deceit as they were to publish the supposed crimes of the YPG?

On Thursday, the Turkish government commemorated the fifth anniversary of the failed coup that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan described as a "gift from God". The coup was attributed to the movement led by his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, which had worked with Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) to oust the old secular and military élite, but had increasingly become seen as a competing source of power. The coup provided the opportunity for Erdoğan to purge Gülenists from all state positions – and also to purge anyone else whose opinions he didn't like. It has been extensively used to attack the Kurds, despite the fact that one of the major points of conflict between the Gülenists and the AKP was the former's opposition to the 2013-15 Kurdish peace process. In the five years since the coup attempt, 321,000 people have been detained and 4,890 have been convicted of crimes connected to the coup.

Just over a week ago, the latest revelations/accusations from Sedat Peker – Mafia boss and former friend and supporter of the AKP government – accused Turkey's Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, of distributing weapons to government supporters following the coup attempt. This is not a new claim as the subject has been brought up many times in parliament – where it has always been dismissed by the government – but Peker provides some explicit details.

On Tuesday, a draft bill was approved to again extend some of the emergency powers introduced in the wake of the coup attempt. These include the power to dismiss public employees on the suspicion of terrorist links and the power to hold suspects in terror-linked cases for up to twelve days without charge. (These powers should be understood in the light of Turkey's very broad and loose definition of what counts as terrorism.)

On Monday, in a potential further erosion of democracy, there was a report of calls by AKP MPs for President Erdoğan to approve measures to limit the time opposition MPs are allowed to speak.

This week also saw a second violent attack on an office of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). This time, the office was empty and no-one was hurt, but the statement made by the HDP's Foreign Affairs Spokespersons pointed out the frightening parallels with the period between the June and November general elections in 2015, when "hundreds of our offices, including our headquarters in Ankara, were attacked by racist mobs, and many were burnt down". They note that almost all those attacks "occurred before the watching eyes of the police and the Ministry of the Interior, who did not take any measures to prevent such attacks or prosecute the perpetrators". State violence against a group does not have to involve direct hands-on complicity. It is often enough to create an atmosphere of hatred and then stand back – as the Russian pogroms so brutally demonstrated. The man who fired 100 bullets at the HDP's office in the Marmaris district of Muğla has been detained, but he should have been under observation as he had attacked the office before, in 2018. Three others have also been detained.

Every day brings new accounts of repression and of the appalling practices of Turkey's compromised judiciary. US researcher, Meghan Bodette, observed on Thursday that she had been trying to get a sense of the scale of repression against the HDP by listing reported incidents over the last two weeks, and had found more than one a day. She also observed, with respect to Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, who was yesterday readmitted to the Turkish Parliament, "It's notable that this is the only case of an imprisoned HDP official that the United States, Turkey's primary NATO backer, has commented on. International pressure works—the US is just actively choosing not to apply it for every other elected official." There was also huge local support for Gergerlioğlu, which was what the US responded to.

Sometimes a single story can give more of a sense of the state of the justice system than any more statistical account. One such story was provided this week by Mezopotamya News Agency, who spoke to a prisoner's mother. She explained how her son suffered severe beatings and communications bans and how even his petitions for books were met with punishments. When she complained she was told by the prison guards, "We are judge and prosecutor here".

The Kurdish freedom movement that follows the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan has sought to encourage what they call a "Democratic Islam", which emphasises brotherhood, peace and justice; but this, too, has met with government oppression. Duvar reports that nine imams have been arrested after being questioned over reciting prayers in Kurdish and not preaching the sermons mandated by Turkey's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet). One reported that pictures of them praying were said to be evidence of illegal activities.

Despite this seemingly relentless oppression, the week provided a further example of the Turkish government backing down in response to pressure – in this case to the mass protests led by the students and academics of Boğaziçi University. These protests have been ongoing since the start of the year and have seen many students detained and mistreated. They were a response to Erdoğan's interference in the running of the university, and especially his appointment of a political ally as rector. On Wednesday,

Erdoğan's rector was dismissed, as he had been appointed, by presidential decree – and, this time, without even being informed. But the students have made clear that this is not enough to address their underlying concerns. They have put out a statement that reads: "From the first day, we repeat that our resistance was not about individuals, but about imposed appointments and trustees! We say that the struggle against trustees appointed to all universities and municipalities should continue on an uncompromising line! #TümKayyumlarGidecek [AllTrusteesWillGo]." This statement links their protest to protests against the government's removal of the democratically elected HDP mayors.

Turkey's interference with academic freedom was also in the firing line at the European Court of Human Rights, which has asked Turkey to provide its defence in the case of academics dismissed from their jobs for signing a peace petition. The case could have implications for the thousands dismissed from their jobs under the post-coup emergency laws.

Across the border, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, politics watchers have been gripped by the unedifying power struggles between two cousins vying for control of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the region's second largest party. The party's founder and first president, Jalal Talabani, died in 2017, and Jalal's son has now ousted Jalal's nephew from the presidency that they were supposed to be sharing. These depressing events are a reminder of how corrupt and far from democratic the Kurdistan region's politics is. The general view seems to be that the change in leadership will be welcomed by the dominant, pro-Turkey, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and by Turkey itself. <https://1001iraqithoughts.com/2021/07/15/the-battle-for-jalal-talabanis-successorship/> The PKK has stressed the importance of the PUK for all Kurds and called on it to resolve its problems via the "authorized mechanisms elected at the congress of the party, on the basis of party law and national responsibility".

Meanwhile, Turkey continues to pursue its invasion of the region's northern mountains. And sad short articles provide regular reminders of the hostile relations between the KDP, which dominates the Kurdistan Regional

Government in Iraq, and the Autonomous Administration established by Kurds and their neighbours in North and East Syria. These recall that, on 10 June, a representative of the Administration and two members of North and East Syria's dominant Democratic Union Party (PYD) were arrested by the KDP when they went to meet people at Hewlêr Airport, and they have not been heard from since.

In North and East Syria, the Autonomous Administration have always been clear that a future settlement for Syria as a whole will only be achieved through dialogue and negotiation, so they have welcomed an offer from Russia's foreign minister to facilitate dialogue with Damascus, provided Russia has a "real, practical plan". They are only too aware that their own hopes and plans will always be sacrificed to Russia's interests, and that Russia will use all means to weaken the Autonomous Authority's hand in any negotiations. This talk about dialogue coincided with Russia's refusal to lift their veto (which is also backed by China) and allow foreign aid to enter directly into North and East Syria from Iraq. Instead, aid must go through Damascus, which, currently, is where most of it stops. And Russia continues to plan Syria's future in conjunction with the two regional imperial powers – Turkey and Iran. A bit over a week ago, all three agreed, with respect to North and East Syria and in a clear reference to the Autonomous Authority, to reject "all attempts to create new realities on the ground, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives under the pretext of combating terrorism." However, North Press Agency reports, from "well-informed American sources", that the licence to operate North and East Syria's oil wells has been transferred to a company that is majority Russian owned, which, they suggest, could help negotiations.

While Iranian involvement in neighbouring countries is well known, it gets relatively little discussion except when a pro-Iranian group attacks an area used by US forces. Last week the Washington Kurdish Institute published an article that looked at the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) in Iraq, which are largely sponsored and trained by Iran. These were established to fight ISIS and now form a parallel military force to the Iraqi army. They are deliberately destabilising, and were involved in killing anti-government protestors in 2019.

Meanwhile, North Press Agency reported on the growth of Iran-backed Shia groups in the part of the Deir ez-Zor area that is to the west of the Euphrates, which is under the Syrian government. These groups have been recruiting large numbers of supporters, especially among children and youth, and promoting Persian language and culture as well as their Shia Islam. Well-funded facilities and the potential for good salaries provide powerful incentives.

European powers, too, are heavily implicated in the politics of the Kurdish lands, especially Germany, which has been close to Turkey since the Nineteenth Century. Shared economic, political and military interests have kept Germany sympathetic to Turkish views, and, in 1993, Germany was the first foreign country to outlaw the PKK. Recently, we saw how Germany prevented some of its citizens joining a peace delegation to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Last week, with less than two days' notice, they banned the international meeting of the Congress of the Democratic Society of Kurdistan in Europe. The KCDK-E, which is registered in Belgium, is made up of 26 associations and institutions, comprising 403 associations. Instead, a reduced meeting, with board elections, was held in the open air after a protest rally.

But I will end this round-up with a small piece of good news on the international front. A decision* has been published on an appeal to Facebook's recently established Oversight Board over the removal of an Instagram post that called for discussion on the solitary confinement of Abdullah Öcalan. This decision makes it clear that, while Facebook will continue "to prohibit content praising or supporting acts of violence by these individuals", "users can debate or discuss the conditions of detention of individuals designated as terrorists or other infringements of their fundamental rights". It also observed that, for three years, Facebook had misplaced an internal instruction on this important exception. The rules over what is considered "support" are still not clearly defined. Calls for Öcalan's freedom could be allowed in certain circumstances, but would have to be carefully contextualised, so it looks as though images that include Freedom

for Öcalan flags could still result in a ban. That won't stop Kurds from keeping those yellow flags flying.