


The Ukraine Effect – a weekly news review

[6:33 am 19/09/2022](#)



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Syria

When the European Representative for the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Abdulkarim Omar, met with MEPs in the European Parliament this week, the war in Ukraine was a constant presence. For a start, as many people commented, it has squeezed much else off the international agenda. Turkey has also been able to use the war to manoeuvre itself into a position where both western countries and Russia are anxious to keep it on side and to do nothing that might cause it to take offence.

Omar had come to Strasbourg to update MEPs on the situation in North and East Syria. Central to his message was the continued threat posed by the Islamic State (ISIS), and the way this is being compounded by attacks from Turkey. It wasn't that long ago that ISIS dominated the news, and the violence of their brief rule inspired worldwide horror. Thanks largely to the Syrian Democratic Forces of the Autonomous Administration, ISIS no longer controls any territory, but it is far from defeated. Now, though, the news cameras have moved on, and so has political interest.

Omar stressed that the Autonomous Administration has been left to guard thousands of ISIS prisoners and tens of thousands of ISIS family members, including a generation of children being brought up to seek revenge. (A recent video shows these children responding to the arrival of the security services by miming beheadings.) The camps and prisons that house the ISIS fighters and their families were only meant to be a temporary solution. The accommodation is inadequate and insecure, and the Administration does not have the resources to do anything about this or even to maintain the necessary security. In Al Hol camp, which houses ISIS families, ISIS rule holds sway, and those who object risk punishment – even murder – by other inmates.

International organisations protest about this mass incarceration without trial. Omar explained that they are right to do so, but that since the Administration is given no official recognition, it is not in a position where it can organise an international court, even if it had the resources. They have long sought international help for this, but nothing has been forthcoming. And they have repeatedly called on European countries to repatriate those ISIS fighters and their families who came from their countries, but only very few have been taken back. European governments hide behind claims that their voters would not accept such repatriations and that they would give ammunition to the far right – and expect North and East Syria to go on bearing the burden.

For a little over three weeks now, the Autonomous Administration has been carrying out a security sweep of Al Hol camp. This week, a second young Yazidi woman was discovered. Yazidi women and girls who were taken by ISIS as sex slaves are afraid to reveal their identity in the camp in case the ISIS

women detained with them attack them. The parts of Syria that were under the control of ISIS still contain ISIS sleeper cells. This week also saw the arrest of two men believed to be organising funding for these cells, and the escape of a captured ISIS fighter who had been taken to hospital, where he killed his two guards.

Giving the example of the ISIS prison breakout in Heseke at the beginning of the year, Omar stressed the risks of an escape from the ISIS prisons and camps, and the dangers this would bring, not just for the region, but for the whole world. And he asked if European countries would wait to act until after ISIS had carried out another strike in Europe.

As Omar told the MEPs, Turkish aggression is making such a scenario more likely. Turkey's attacks – which are directed against civilians and also against the people who are fighting against ISIS – are designed to make the region insecure. They increase the threat from ISIS by increasing the chances of a mass escape when security forces are busy elsewhere, and also by generally disrupting all the work that is being done to build a well-functioning society. When people can't find security, they are more readily recruited by extremist groups. ISIS also receives direct help from Turkey and finds sanctuary in the Turkish occupied areas.

BUT, with war in Ukraine, Western governments have become even less likely to attempt to restrain Turkey, as the Turkish government plays on their fears that Turkey could defect completely to the Russian side. Meanwhile, President Putin and President Erdoğan have been working out mutually beneficial deals. It has been argued that the only thing that is preventing Russia from allowing Turkey to carry out another major invasion into the areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration is Iran, with which Russia also has a mutually beneficial relationship. Iran does not want to see more of Syria coming under the control of their Turkish rivals. However, Russia is doing nothing to prevent Turkey's daily attacks on northern Syria, which make life next to impossible for those living in border areas, kill key figures who are leading the fight against ISIS, and target essential services, including the water supply for millions of people.

Russia's plan is to bring Erdoğan together with Syria's President Assad. It has been reported that there have been meetings between the intelligence chiefs of the two countries, but, for the moment, Erdoğan appears to show more enthusiasm than Assad, who wants to see Turkey end its occupation of Syrian land. Erdoğan expressed his disappointment that he was not able to meet Assad at this week's Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Uzbekistan, as the Syrian President did not attend; and Sputnik News has reported that Turkey has been pulling the rug from under the Syrian opposition groups that they have been supporting, and telling them that they must close their offices in Turkey by the end of the year. If the two autocrats unite, this would destroy all hope for autonomy and democracy. By reinforcing the bonds between Russian and Turkey, Ukraine has brought the possibility of such an outcome closer.

Sweden and Finland

The most blatant impact of the Ukraine war on Kurdish politics and Kurdish lives derives from the possibility it has provided for Turkey to use its veto over NATO membership and to attempt to coerce Sweden and Finland into clamping down on the Kurds in their respective countries. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu has again reminded the two Nordic countries that Turkey will not ratify their NATO membership applications unless they take the "necessary steps". These include restricting Kurdish political activity and extraditing a list of named individuals. A week ago, Finland's Ministry of Justice made clear that, in the absence of entirely new evidence, Finnish law did not allow the possibility of re-opening rejected extradition requests, as Ankara had demanded. However, in Swedish politics, this week's election has proved a dangerous turning point. The parties of the right now have a slight majority and are set to form a government that will be supported by the Sweden Democrats – a far right party, with neo-Nazi roots – that won over 20% of the vote. This will be a firmly pro-NATO government, and immigration and crime – and purported links between the two – were at the centre of the election debates. Kurdish rights and freedoms are unlikely to be treated as a priority.

Armenia and Azerbaijan

Turkey isn't the only country for whom Ukraine has proved a useful war. Their close allies in Azerbaijan have also jumped at the opportunities the Ukraine war has offered. After Azerbaijan's capture of the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia two years ago, with the help of Turkish arms and even some of Turkey's Syrian mercenaries, Russia brokered a ceasefire. Russia has a defence agreement with Armenia. In recent months the European Union has been mediating peace negotiations, but it seems that on Monday night, Azerbaijan's dictatorial president, Ilham Aliyev, took the opportunity of Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine to strengthen his hand, with new strikes into the main part of Armenia. Turkey expressed their full support for this attack, blaming Armenian provocation, but that would make little sense.^a Besides Turkey's brutal history of anti-Armenian racism, the Turkish government supports Azerbaijan's ambition of carving out a connecting corridor along Armenia's Iranian border. Such a corridor would be a vital link for their own dreams of neo-Ottoman and pan-Turkic power.

This July, the European Commission's president, Ursula von der Leyen, celebrated an agreement with Aliyev to double gas imports from Azerbaijan to take the place of gas imports from Russia. As was protested at the time, this agreement put the European Union into a dependent relationship with another belligerent state. In her State of the Union address to the European Parliament on Wednesday, von der Leyen, dressed in Ukrainian blue and yellow, made no mention of Armenia, or Armenian right to resist invasion, though the issue has been raised by MEPs.

By late Wednesday, Moscow had negotiated another ceasefire. Although, as in Syria, Russia and Turkey are on opposing sides, they have demonstrated that this will not stop them from negotiating. Moscow has stated that both sides should return to their previous positions, but Ankara no doubt hopes that the growing mutual dependence between Turkey and Russia in other areas will serve to favour the Turkish negotiating position in the Caucasus, too.

Iraq

It is harder to argue that the Ukraine war has distracted attention from Turkey's incursions into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since the rest of the world has long shown its intention to ignore these, but Ukraine has not made it any easier to publicise what is happening.

Turkey has been using the excuse of carrying out pre-emptive attacks against the the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who they classify as "terrorists", in order to establish a growing network of military bases in the northern Iraqi mountains. This un-talked-about war has killed scores of civilians, displaced thousands of villagers, and destroyed orchards and apiaries and thousands of acres of farmland and forest.

The United States, which has always been keen to demonstrate their support for Turkey – and also to back attacks on popular left-wing movements – is fully behind Turkey's actions. Last week, the US Embassy in Turkey tweeted "sincerest condolences to the families and friends of the Turkish soldiers who lost their lives in a clash with terrorists in Northern Iraq", adding "We stand with our NATO ally Turkey in the fight against terrorism."

Turkey is being helped in its invasion by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which, in their greed for power and riches, is effectively abandoning their hard-won Kurdish autonomy to work with their powerful neighbour. Firat News Agency has shared a video that is claimed to show KDP forces building military positions for the Turkish army.

In a very visual demonstration of KDP subservience towards Turkey, a giant map of Kurdistan that had been hung in the Faculty of Social Sciences of Zakho University was replaced after just three weeks with a new version. This shows only the part controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government, and not the areas that are part of neighbouring countries The replacement was made after a visit by a KDP minister.

Turkish interference in Iraqi politics more generally included a visit last Sunday by the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT),

Hakan Fidan. Choosing an intelligence chief to undertake an essentially diplomatic mission – both here and in Syria – does not send very reassuring messages. Fehim Taştekin comments that “Fidan’s role in Turkey’s foreign ties has increased in recent years, especially on security-related issues.”

Turkey

Turkish freedoms and human rights are going from bad to worse, but the politics of the Ukraine war ensure that other countries would prefer not to see what is happening. While Western countries are worried that Turkey may defect and turn against NATO, Putin is working with Erdoğan on sanction-avoiding arrangements that are beneficial to both governments. Amberin Zaman argues that “Erdoğan’s friendship is growing ever more important for Putin” and that this has been manifested in the boost Russia has given to Turkey’s foreign currency reserves.

Putin would not want to see Erdoğan lose the forthcoming election, which must take place by next June. Many Western politicians might be content for him to win too, if only for fear of what he might attempt if he lost. Not that anyone concerned with human rights, and especially Kurdish rights, can place much faith, either, in the main opposition alliance, which is all firmly rooted in Turkey’s ethnic nationalist tradition. The biggest party, the Republican People’s Party, was responsible for many past abuses, and its biggest partner, the İYİ Party, is a breakaway from Erdoğan’s far right allies, the MHP.

The persistence of persecution is demonstrated in the case of the 1992 assassination of the Kurdish writer and political activist, Musa Anter, who is believed to have been killed by the Turkish secret state organisation, JİTEM, which is responsible for huge numbers of deaths and disappearances in that period. The case has just been adjourned to 21 September, one day after it reaches its statute of limitations. Anter’s son, Dicler Anter, has stated, “The Musa Anter murder [case] will drop due to the statute of limitations on September 20. However, there is no statute of limitations for crimes against humanity. Our struggle to shed light on the murder will continue.” And he observed “We don’t know whether justice will be served if the [government]

changes, because the authorities of that time are within the opposition right now.”

Resistance

Every action against the Kurds tends to be met with resistance – even in today’s unpropitious circumstances. People will resist however they can, and for those already in prison, that can mean putting their own health and lives on the line, and going on hunger strike. To demand their basic rights, three prisoners are on hunger strike in Kilis, six prisoners are on hunger strike in Kırıklar, and four journalists who are held on remand are carrying out a five-day hunger strike in Diyarbakır Women’s Prison. Sibel Balaç has been hospitalised after nine months of refusing food in order to demand a fair trial.

In Afrîn, in north-west Syria, which has been occupied by Erdoğan since March 2018, and has been under the brutal control of competing mercenary gangs, a resistance group which calls itself the Afrîn Liberation Forces undertakes attacks against the occupiers. They claim that between 23 August and 9 September they carried out six operations, killing four Turkish soldiers and twelve Turkish mercenaries.

Resistance also takes the form of protests and marches – this week, young activists campaigning for the freedom of Abdullah Öcalan have been taking part in a 6-day march across Germany – and of cultural celebrations, such as the festival being held in the Netherlands today.

This week also saw the announcement of an important solidarity action from outwith the Kurdish community. Three hundred and fifty lawyers from 22 different countries have applied to act for Öcalan and the other three prisoners in Imrali, and to visit the island prison. This follows an application by 775 lawyers from within Turkey which was made in June. The lawyers may not be expecting to be told to pack their bags and get ready for a visit, but they are helping to build a movement that it becomes harder for others to ignore.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her website and follow her on Twitter.