

Erdoğan's multifaceted war against the Kurds – a weekly news review

[2:51 pm 19/06/2021](#)



Sarah Glynn

On Thursday morning, a man wearing gloves and carrying a large bag walked past the plain-clothes police officers stationed outside and entered the offices of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the western Turkish city of İzmir. The only person in the offices was a young woman named Deniz Poyraz. The man pulled out a gun and shot her dead. He shot into the other offices and attempted to set them on fire. Then he left the building and was arrested by police, who gently asked him, "What is your name brother?"

The man's name is Onur Gencer, and his social media posts show him visiting places run by the Turkish-backed militia in Syria. If a planned board meeting had not been postponed, the HDP offices would have been full of people, and he would have carried out a massacre.

Of the many pictures being shared of Deniz Poyraz, the most poignant shows her tearfully holding a poster of Dilan Kortak, who was murdered by Turkish police in 2015. People are asking who will be next.

Last Saturday, seventeen members of a peace delegation, including politicians, were stopped by German federal police at Düsseldorf airport and prevented from going to Hewlêr (Erbil), where they had hoped to help draw world attention to the ongoing Turkish invasion of South Kurdistan/Iraqi Kurdistan and the risk of intra-Kurdish war. Other delegates were detained at Hewlêr Airport and sent home, and some were stopped in (Turkey-friendly) Qatar. German police issued a statement that the visit "harms our relations with Turkey, which is a NATO partner."

Also on Saturday, missiles were launched at a hospital in Turkish-occupied Afrîn, killing civilians. Turkey immediately blamed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), but this was quickly denied. The SDF said they never target civilians, and they shared evidence suggesting that Turkish-backed militias knew about the attack in advance – and had done nothing to evacuate the buildings. The SDF would not have gained anything from such an attack, but several people, including Îlham Ehmadi from the Syrian Democratic Council, have suggested that this was a Turkish ploy to try and turn the United States against the SDF in the run-up to the NATO Summit and President Erdoğan's first meeting with President Biden.

Three worrying news stories from three different countries, and all three the result of Turkey's war on the Kurds.

Ethno-nationalism is written into the Turkish constitution, but the current virulent anti-Kurdish aggression, spearheaded by Erdoğan, began in 2014-15. Kurdish success against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Kobanê,

and support for the pro-Kurdish HDP in the June 2015 general election (which denied Erdoğan a majority), marked out the Kurds as the chief opposition to all his plans for greater power at home and abroad.

Turkey's aggressions against the Kurds in these different places cannot be understood in isolation. Every gain Erdoğan makes in one place empowers him in another. And every time other states allow his actions to pass without consequence – or even, give Turkey their support – he is emboldened to go further.

Last week also saw the NATO summit and the much-anticipated Erdoğan-Biden meeting, but reports of these have very little to say about this increasingly aggressive and authoritarian NATO member, apart from the worrying prospect of Turkey playing a lead role in securing Kabul Airport.

War at home

The murder of Deniz Poyraz in İzmir is part of a much wider attack on the HDP. Proceedings are continuing in the Kobanê Case, which seeks life imprisonment for 108 party members, and, on Friday, the rapporteur to the Constitutional Court recommended acceptance of the resubmitted indictment to close down the party altogether, and to ban 451 party members from politics for five years. The rejection of the initial indictment will only serve to give the courts a fig-leaf with which to hide the erasure of judicial independence.

Propaganda against the HDP has been unrelenting, from both government and government-controlled media. The HDP follows a strictly political and peaceful path, but the propagandists seek to portray the party as “PKK” and out to destroy Turkey. In one television report, the background graphic of the party tree symbol replaced the leaves with bombs and bullets. To reinforce the PKK link in the public mind, the government has been encouraging families who claim that the PKK has ‘abducted’ their children to protest outside HDP offices, including the office in İzmir. The police presence outside the office was not there to protect the HDP, but to keep a check on party activity.

Many people have drawn a comparison between Thursday's attack on the İzmir office and the plague of violent and often fatal attacks against HDP offices and events in 2015. HDP Co-Chair, Mithat Sancar, recalled, "At that time, similar plans were at stake. Our party headquarters was attacked, our employees were murdered, bombs were thrown at squares, hundreds of people were killed in suicide bombings, the country was drowned in blood." He observed that "the government feeds on chaos and wants to silence the democratic opposition through threats and blackmail". And it isn't only the HDP that is making comparisons with 2015. The chair of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, tweeted, "We went through this scenario before, our people won't fall for it this time. I'm warning, nobody should pin their hopes on these provocations!"

Government responsibility need not be direct. The fact that it has planted and nurtured a virulent hatred for the HDP is enough; though there are plenty of people suggesting that the authorities didn't go out of their way to stop the attack, and many imputing more direct official involvement.

The HDP has met this latest attack with its usual defiance. Thousands came to Friday's funeral chanting "Deniz Poyraz is immortal" and "HDP is the people, the people are here."

War in Iraq

Outwith left-wing circles, international criticism of Turkey's domestic policies and their slide into authoritarianism has been muted, and tempered by tactical considerations. This has been even more true with respect to Turkey's ongoing invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan, which rarely even gets a mention. That is why the international peace delegation is so necessary.

Turkey – as always – deflects potential criticism by its international allies through portraying its invasion of the Iraqi mountains as an 'anti-terrorism operation against the PKK,' who it has persuaded amongst its allies to include on their 'terrorism lists.' This gives no idea of the magnitude of what is happening. These operations constitute a major extension of Turkish power. We are witnessing a creeping occupation that has seen Turkey establish over

forty military bases, build many kilometres of military road, and deploy thousands of troops; that, just in the last few weeks, has caused thousands of local people to abandon their homes and village lands; and that shows no sign of being reversed.

This occupation is part of Turkey's multifaceted war against the Kurds – a war it is pursuing in Turkey itself, in North and East Syria, and in Iraq. An attack in any one part affects the others. The PKK is not only defending its mountain bases, it is protecting South Kurdistan from a Turkish invasion that would be used as the launchpad for further attacks on Kurdish areas and further expansion of Erdoğan's imperial project. The Turkish military want to increase their control over South Kurdistan, and they want to isolate and attack the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

So why is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, so antagonistic to those who call for peace in the region? And why has it sent its peshmerga into the mountains to undermine the PKK's defence of Kurdistan against an anti-Kurdish power-hungry aggressor?

A recent report claims that 180 peshmerga in Atrush training camp in Dohuk put down their guns with the declaration "We will not fight against guerrillas." Bloodshed between the KDP peshmerga and the PKK guerrillas based in the Iraqi mountains is feared by most Kurds, and PKK commander, Murat Karayilan, has stated that "an internal Kurdish war is tantamount to a catastrophe for us." But it would delight the Turkish government, and it is trying hard to make this happen. What could be better, from Erdoğan's perspective, than to set one group of Kurds against another?

For the Turkish state, this is a tried and tested technique. In North Kurdistan/South-East Turkey, villagers were told to work for the government as 'village guards' and fight the PKK, or be forced out of their homes. Village guards receive government pay and a get-out-of-jail-free card for criminal activity. The KDP, in South Kurdistan today, has been accused of acting as Turkey's village guards.

The KDP – unlike the PKK – now enjoys international recognition, but for its first 45 years, it, too, regarded its members as freedom fighters. When the PKK, who had just begun their struggle for Kurdish freedom across the border in Turkey, found a haven in Iraq's northern mountains in the early eighties, they, the KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – which broke from the KDP in 1975 – were all carrying out armed struggle for Kurdish liberation. Briefly, they even signed protocols of understanding; but these didn't last long, especially as Turkey, which began cross border attacks against the PKK in the 1980s, was increasing its influence in the region.

Before finally achieving de facto Kurdish autonomy in 1991, the KDP had survived through decades of battles under different strategic alliances. Perhaps years of military struggle make it hard to move to an existence based on democratic structures, and to stop responding to differences with violence. It wasn't long before the KDP and the PUK were fighting a bitter civil war, which the KDP only survived by calling on support from Saddam Hussein.

Both the KDP and the PUK have allied with Turkey against the PKK in the past, but for the KDP, this has become a fixed pattern. It controls the northern part of the Kurdistan region, which puts it geographically closer to Turkey and gives it control over the lucrative border crossings. Especially since it made an oil deal with Turkey in 2009, it has been dependent on Turkey economically. Despite its own history of struggle, the KDP has worked increasingly closely with Turkey against the PKK. In 1997, it agreed to a permanent Turkish military presence in South Kurdistan, and this has expanded with subsequent Turkish military operations.

The ruthless feudal control that evolved in the KDP and the PUK through their years of struggle continues to dominate both parties, resulting in serious problems with democracy internally and more generally. Contradicting and resisting South Kurdistan authorities is not easy. As in Turkey, economic stress has translated into declining popularity for the government, and politicians have responded by clamping down on dissent. Sometimes, that clamping down is done at the behest of Turkey.

Massive corruption has worsened inequalities and inefficiencies, and people in government jobs – which covers a large part of the population – haven't been paid full salaries for months. At the end of last year, angry demonstrations brought together those protesting unpaid salaries with young men protesting a future without opportunity. The Kurdish authorities responded with a violent crackdown, leaving nine young protestors dead, and they have been rounding up activists and journalists. An Amnesty International report on this round-up was released last week. It records accounts of people being 'disappeared' for months, of solitary confinement, threats, denial of meetings with lawyers, dependence on an anonymous and un-interrogated witness. When one defendant claimed he was tortured by the security services, he was given an additional charge of defamation.

However, when it comes to taking up arms against the PKK, dissident voices are making themselves heard. Apart from the KDP, no other party supports this fight. Most peshmerga forces are linked to either the KDP or the PUK, and PUK leaders have made clear that the PUK peshmerga will not fight the PKK – though they are not actually supporting them either. There is disquiet over the massive environmental destruction resulting from Turkey's military roads and scorched earth policies, and over the impact of Turkey's attacks on the civilian population.

The difficulties of resistance, but also the determination of those standing up for peace, are demonstrated by another young Kurdish woman. Gelawêj Hemzî Selîm, whose peshmerga father died in fighting between the KDP and PKK in 1995, went on (KDP-linked) Rudaw Radio to argue against this "fratricidal war." After the broadcast, she received death threats, including from her own uncle, but she refused to accept her father's death as martyrdom, saying, "This war brought nothing good to our people."