

# We need to talk about Iran-a weekly news review

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## Sarah Glynn

Generally, we hear little about Iran, which manages to keep shrouded in a mysterious silence; but occasionally, they make a strike that forces the rest of the world to take notice. Last Sunday, such a strike hit a house in the vicinity of the newly constructed United States consulate building in Hewler (Erbil) in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and, unusually, responsibility was immediately claimed by Iran itself. Earlier attacks on US targets in the region have been attributed to Iranian-backed forces within Iraq, but this attack, by ballistic missiles, was launched from Iran itself. Government-linked sources in Iran claim that the target was not the not-yet-occupied consulate but a base

used by agents from Israel's Mossad and that this strike was retaliation for previous airstrikes by Israel. Despite denials of an Israeli presence by both Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government and by the United States, the New York Times quotes two anonymous US officials who confirmed that Israel had conducted intelligence operations against Iran from the region, with one saying that the building hit on Sunday was used by Israel for intelligence and training. The New York Times sees the strikes by both sides as representing "an alarming escalation in the long-running shadow war between Iran and Israel".

Sunday's attack also highlights the presence of a major regional power whose interference in its neighbouring countries is not adequately discussed. Although, during most of the 1980s, Iran and Iraq fought a devastating and protracted war, the 2003 defeat of Saddam Hussein by the United States and their allies and the chaos that followed enabled the growth of a strong pro-Iranian presence in Iraq. Today, this is expressed both in parliamentary politics and through militias that have been given official status within the Iraqi army as Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs). These PMUs are categorically opposed to any US military presence in the country and have carried out strikes on US bases, especially after the US assassination in Bagdad, in January 2020, of Qasem Soleimani, the man in charge of Iran's foreign military interventions.

These PMUs are also opposed to Turkish intervention in Iraq outwith the Kurdish region, and the Shiite militias work with the Yazidi self-defence force in Şengal (Sinjar), which has also been brought into the PMU fold. However, Iran is no friend of the Kurdish freedom movement, and they cooperate with Turkey to attack Kurdish guerrilla bases in the mountains of the Kurdistan Region.

In Syria, Iran is a long-term ally of President Basher al-Assad and has supported the Syrian government with training and intelligence as well as military supplies and ground forces – including through the recruitment of fighters from other places, such as Afghanistan. It has been claimed that they have mobilised tens of thousands of fighters (mostly mercenaries) and spent tens of billions of pounds.

Recent months have seen reports of growing Iranian influence in the regime-held section of Deir ez-Zor Governorate, west of the Euphrates. The Washington Institute has described a wholesale militarisation of the area through a range of Iran-linked militias, and a deliberate and concerted Iranianisation and Shiitisation of the region. Homes and land have been confiscated to make way for Iranian militias and their infrastructure, while Iranian culture backed by Iranian money and social organisation is becoming increasingly dominant so that the region's children are growing up in a society totally different to that familiar to their parents. There is still great poverty and shortage of employment, and many young people seek to escape this by joining the relatively well-paid Iranian militias.

Battles for regional power may take scant notice of borders, and Israel has made many attacks on Iranian military bases in Syria. For this, Israel has the tacit agreement of Russia, who, as the main supporters of President Assad, are also allied with Iran. But as Russia's relations with Turkey which supports the forces fighting Assad – show even more clearly, power competition makes for some complicated relationships. Iranian public anger continues to focus on the United States, and Russia, Iran and Turkey meet for regular discussions on Syria's future.

Even less information reaches us about the situation inside Iran, beyond lengthening lists of people punished for standing up for basic rights and protests by people on poverty pay for whom their government's spending on foreign adventures is an additional source of anger.

The Iranian government has issued its list of bans for the forthcoming Nowruz festival. It includes no national or political symbols even red flowers, which have been adopted instead of the banned flags – no national or political songs and no Kurdish dancing. Bans aren't just for Kurds. This is a Persian festival too, and Persian tradition includes a fire festival on the last Wednesday of the old year. These pre-Islamic celebrations are anathema to Iran's clerical regime and have become doubly so as they are used as occasions for defying the government. Access roads were restricted and some festival goers were met with special forces and detentions.

## Turkey's Ukraine war

In geopolitics, no opportunity can be overlooked, however dreadful the circumstances, and, with the world order undergoing convulsions, all powers are jostling to end up near the top. Turkey's positive relations with both Ukraine and Moscow have led to much discussion about how they will negotiate their unique combination of opportunities and potential pitfalls.

Both President Erdoğan and his foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, have been busy wooing world leaders and neighbouring states and reversing Turkey's recent aggressive posture; and they have been working hard to portray Turkey as the indispensable peace mediator. This week, Erdoğan met with the Prime Minister of Greece and with the Chancellor of Germany, and spoke to Russia's President Putin on the phone, while Çavuşoğlu went in person to Moscow and Lviv. Cengiz Candar wrote in Al Monitor, "Within the span of a week after the invasion, Turkey moved out of isolation. It regained its relevance in the international arena, perhaps at a level unseen during the last decade." But he also warned that, with a long war, Turkey's room to manoeuvre between the West and Russia could narrow.

Pinar Tremblay, also in Al Monitor, described a sense of optimism among supporters of President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), who believe the war in Ukraine could provide an opportunity for their party to recover the support that they have lost due to the struggling economy. War brings out desires for a forceful leader, and war dominates the news, leaving even less space for coverage of the opposition. Economic recovery will be even more difficult, but economic woes can now be blamed on the impact of the war. However, economic suffering may already be too deeply entrenched and associated with the AKP government for this to make a difference.

We can expect there to be even less international attention than before given to Turkey's own human rights abuses, though Thursday's EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee took place as planned, including a discussion on democracy. Both Sergey Lagodinsky, as co-chair, and Nacho Sánchez Amor, as rapporteur, held a firm line, with the latter stressing that Turkey was moving backwards and reminding the representatives of Turkey's ruling AKP of the

importance of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) for solving the hugely important Kurdish issue. Ünal Gevîk  , for the Republican People's Party (CHP), reiterated the need for Turkey to obey the European Court of Human Rights, and that the Kurdish problem has to be resolved in parliament – with the HDP playing its legitimate part, and he criticised the current “maximalist interpretation of terrorism”, which omits human values. Representatives from the AKP painted a fanciful picture of the government as promoters of human rights and the HDP as apologists for suicide bombers murdering innocents. But even these AKP members would have been hard put to compete with Monday's speech from the Turkish Interior Minister, S  leyman Soylu, who gave his logistical gymnastics a new contortion with an attempt to link businessman/philanthropist, Osman Kavala, via George Soros, to the deaths of all children killed in war: “The Soros supporters here [in Turkey] are those who follow Kavala. Whoever wants Kavala to be released by deceiving the laws are also the murderers of children in Ukraine and Syria”. (The demonisation of Soros is a modern antisemitic trope.)

### **Misogyny on the march**

Abdullah   calan wrote that “A country can't be free unless the women are free”. The Turkish government seems determined to prove this in a negative fashion by locking up and silencing as many women as possible. Last week's massive shows of resistance for International Women's Day have been answered by a new round-up of women activists. Detention warrants were drawn up for 24 people associated with the rallies and protests in Diyarbakir, and homes were raided early on Wednesday morning. Those detained include Filiz Buluttekin, former co-mayor of Sur district who had been replaced with a government-appointed trustee; Fatma Yildizhan, secretary of the Health and Social Service Workers' Union (SES) in Diyarbakir; and Adalet Kaya, Chair of Rosa Women's Association.

Meanwhile, a draft law on male violence only scratches the surface of what is required, and Turkey's Supreme Court has provided further evidence of the need for a fundamental change in social attitudes. The Court has approved the reduced sentence given to the murderer of Hatice Ka  maz, who worked

for state broadcaster TRT and was killed after she rejected her assailant's proposal of marriage. The murderer stabbed her 15 times with a large knife but had had his sentence reduced on the grounds that this was an impulsive act produced by "emotions arising from extreme love" and the "fury that impacted his mood".

## **Human Rights and democracy**

In other worrying decisions by Turkey's politicised judiciary, an appeals court has ruled that the policeman who shot and killed the student, Kemal Kurkut, at the 2017 Newroz celebration in Diyarbakir, was acting "within legal framework". Thus no offence was committed, and the killing "did not violate his right to life". Photographs show Kurkut running bare-chested and the police shooting him from behind.

The Ankara 22nd High Criminal Court has ruled that Aysel Tuğluk must make her defence in the Kobane trial despite being diagnosed with dementia and being deemed unfit to remain in prison by Kocaeli University Hospital. And twenty lawyers are being investigated by Diyarbakir Public Prosecutor's Office for membership in a terrorist organisation due to acting, in a professional capacity, on behalf of families whose children were killed fighting for the PKK.

In more police raids, ten people were detained yesterday morning in Adana for making "propaganda for a terrorist organization". And the Kurdish singer, Çiya Şenses, was detained in Istanbul, with his investigation file classified under a confidentiality order. Firat News Agency describes this as "a common method used by the Turkish judiciary to torpedo the defence".

Turkish border guards have carried out extrajudicial killings of two young men whose bodies were found with signs of severe torture. Adel Muhammad al-Badr and Taha Al-Mohammed, both aged 21, were attempting to cross from Rojava into Turkey. The Rojava Information Centre notes that "According to @syriahr, 8 civilians have been killed, including 2 children, & 13 injured by Turkish border guards in 2022."

Meanwhile, after protracted discussions, the Turkish government is putting forward a bill to amend election rules. Clearly, it is aimed to increase their own chances. Plans to distribute seats in each constituency by party rather than by electoral alliance have been shown to benefit the ruling alliance and disadvantage the smaller parties in the opposition alliance including the far-right Good Party (İYİ), which has been getting a growing share of support. There are various tricks that can be used to get around this disadvantage, but they will require planning and negotiation. Curiously, the new system might actually benefit the HDP due to their support being geographically concentrated. As anticipated, the threshold of votes needed to get any MPs has been reduced from 10 to 7%. The HDP has been polling over 10%, and other parties are in alliances, so this would not make a difference at the moment.

### **In Iraq**

Last week saw the anniversary of the mass gassing of the Kurds by Saddam Hussein in Halabja. Although 5,000 Kurds were killed that day in 1988, the world took a long time to acknowledge what had happened, and the massacre only became a focus of diplomatic outrage when Saddam Hussein became America's enemy. The scale is different, but parallels have been drawn with the refusal of international powers including the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons to investigate the accumulating evidence of the use of chemical weapons by Turkish forces in their incursions into northern Iraq today.

### **In Syria**

Turkey also continues its relentless low-level attacks on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Two civilians were injured in a drone attack on Tuesday, and there was a further drone attack on Wednesday. After the Wednesday attack, the Rojava Information Centre tweeted "This is the 20th drone attack on NES in 2022. At least 7 people have been killed & 17 injured by these attacks."

This week saw two further sad anniversaries: the anniversary of the occupation of the Rojava canton of Afrîn, which Turkey's mercenaries have turned into a hell on earth; and the anniversary of the first unrest that later became the Syrian civil war, in which, as [the United Nations reports](#), "Hundreds of thousands have been killed, [and] more than half of the pre-war population somewhere in the order of 22 million have been displaced".

The invasion of Afrîn was made possible by Russia, who controlled the air space, but was carried out by "peace mediator" Turkey. The Autonomous Administration has been ready to negotiate a peaceful democratic future for Syria for a long time, but President Assad won't countenance anything other than the centralised control that existed before the protests and civil war.

This week, aggressive interference by the regime's Syrian Arab Army resulted in [a firefight](#) in the Kurdish majority neighbourhoods of Aleppo. These neighbourhoods are run on the same political lines as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but they are geographically separated and so liable to periodic embargos imposed by the Syrian regime. On this occasion, a truck driver bringing sugar refused to let his vehicle be confiscated by Syrian soldiers. The soldiers opened fire, and this was returned by the Kurdish security forces. Two soldiers were injured, one fatally.

Despite all that is lined up against them, the Autonomous Authority is still in control of a large part of Syria and is even taking heart from calls for more autonomy from other parts of the country. Rojava Information Centre [notes](#), "Despite the appearance of political deadlock, this year's anniversary coincides with renewed anti-government protests in Daraa, where the 2011 revolution began, as well as Druze-majority Suwayda, where activists have called for an AANES-style "democratic & decentralized" system."

This week, the week of the Kurdish new year, is a time dedicated to building and celebrating resistance. Wherever you are, Newroz pîroz be!

\*Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#)



