

# This shall pass – a weekly news review

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When, 23 years ago, a CIA-led international plot captured Abdullah Öcalan and handed him over to the Turkish government, the plotters doubtlessly calculated that they had delivered a mortal blow to the Kurdish Freedom Movement. At the time, the world was taken aback by the outpouring of anger and resistance from all the places where Kurds lived. Today, the continued and growing support for the Kurdish cause is visible everywhere, especially around 15 February, the anniversary of Öcalan's capture, when thousands take to the streets in many different cities. Although the governments that took part in the original plot still follow Turkey's lead in branding Öcalan as the leader of a terrorist organisation, the marchers' demands are for a political solution. These are marches for peace, and Öcalan has been ready to

negotiate a peaceful future for the Kurds for a very long time. This positive message is recognised by the international support given to the call for Öcalan's freedom – as demonstrated by tweets from French left leaders, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Olivier Besancenot, and Fabien Roussel; by the editorial of La Marseillaise; by trade union campaigns in the UK and in South Africa; by marchers from Italian civil society; and by elected politicians speaking at the demonstrations, such as the Australian Green Party MPs. In fact, support could grow much larger if these Kurdish rallies put greater emphasis on using the opportunity to engage with the wider public.

## **Turkey**

The anniversary of Öcalan's capture was commemorated by protests in Turkey, too, of course, despite police blockades in Istanbul and in Amed/Diyarbakir.

The Turkish government marked the occasion with a new round of detentions. Firat News Agency counted at least 138 people – members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) activists, journalists – detained in various cities in the days leading up to 15 February.

Also beyond the Kurdish question, the vindictiveness of the Turkish state has been demonstrated yet again, with calls for almost thirteen years imprisonment for the television journalist, Sedef Kabaş who has been accused of "insulting" President Erdoğan and two of his ministers through quoting a proverb.

Kabaş's gender won't have helped her case. The state's violence towards women is blatant. BBC Turkish has revealed the shocking case of a Turkish man who was sentenced to life by a Belgian court after the murder of his pregnant sister, his wife, his former wife, and his former mother in law, and who was extradited after 5 years to serve the rest of his sentence in Turkey. In Turkey, he was released after only three years in prison, and subsequently cleared of all charges.

Turkey's extensive and brutal human rights abuses were the subject of a four-day civil society 'tribunal' held in Geneva last September. The Belgian legal firm behind that tribunal has announced that this year they will be using the huge amount of evidence the tribunal collected to file a case against Turkey for crimes against humanity, at the International Criminal Court in the Hague.

Meanwhile, there is mounting evidence of the corruption induced by power. It has been found that charitable donations, totalling 6.2 million Turkish Lira, that the Municipality of Istanbul raised to help people suffering as a result of Covid, have been absorbed into state funds after being confiscated by the central government. From Van, Firat News Agency reports that the government-appointed trustee who replaced the elected mayor has arranged to get paid five salaries for this position, and has made similar arrangements for his key staff and supporters. And, in an unnecessary reminder of the dictatorial nature of Erdoğan's presidency, an Ankara district governor has ordered local leaders, or mukhtars, to hang portraits of the president in their offices.

Attacks on the HDP are not only carried out through the judicial system. Recently there have been several physical attacks on HDP offices – including the attack in İzmir last June in which party worker, Deniz Poyraz, was murdered. Even if there is no direct state involvement in these attacks, which many believe there to be, the government's incessant portrayal of the HDP as a terrorist organisation encourages others to take the law into their own hands. On Wednesday night, it was the turn of the HDP's Yüreğir District office in Adana Province, which was attacked with bullets and a Molotov cocktail, though this was noticed before the fire caused could spread. So far, attacks have been nowhere near as violent as the attacks on the party between the June and November elections in 2015. Still, comparisons are being made with that period, which set a dangerous precedent.

In a democracy, an attack on a political party's office can be expected to cause government concern and support for the attacked party, but, in Turkey, the police blocked the HDP's protest against the attack. Attendees at the

protest included the Adana Provincial Chairman of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), who strongly condemned the attack.

While the CHP is happy to make this public show in support of democracy, it is very wary of showing any sort of closeness with the HDP – wary of its own ethnic-nationalist members and supporters; wary of its election coalition partners, the ultra-nationalist Good Party (İYİ); and wary of allowing the government to portray them as friends of terrorists.

Last week, six opposition parties got together to discuss how to restore parliamentary democracy: the CHP, the İYİ, and four small parties, none of whom muster much support. Noticeably missing from the table was the third biggest party in the Turkish Parliament, the HDP.

The HDP do not want to be part of a formal coalition with other parties with whom they have little in common. Still, they do want to be part of the tactical discussions over the process of reversing Erdoğan's undemocratic changes. We don't know to what Erdoğan might resort to prevent the HDP, or a successor party if they are banned, from gaining seats in the next election; but, as the polls stand, the HDP are in a position to be king-makers, and they don't want their support taken for granted. In the past, the other parties and leaders have been as bad in their treatment of the Kurds as Erdoğan has been, and the HDP is looking for a commitment that this time will be different.

The HDP's co-chairs have stressed the need for collaboration and that negotiation with the HDP is essential for achieving genuine democracy. They want to put forward their own platform in the parliamentary elections but would be open to supporting a joint opposition candidate for the presidency dedicated to returning the country to parliamentary democracy.

Although they were excluded from the opposition round table in Ankara, the HDP have had important meetings in other parts of the world. In Germany, Turkey's most important European partner, an HDP delegation met this week with representatives of the ruling Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party, and also with representatives of Die Linke and of the international Progressive Alliance.

## Iraq

The HDP delegation that visited the targets of Turkish bombings in Shengal and Maxmur refugee camp in Iraq last week has now presented their report. The situations they describe result from collaboration between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Turkey. Notably, they were told that Yazidis in IDP camps are prevented from leaving and are 'subjected to policies of intense religious and cultural assimilation', and that some have been forced to become spies by operatives from the Turkish secret service (MIT), with the threat of death if they don't comply. And they were also told about the impact of the embargo on Maxmur Camp, which was imposed by the KDP in 2019 as a collective punishment after the murder of Turkish Vice Consul in Erbil, who is believed to have been working for MIT. In both Shengal and Maxmur, the people are calling for international powers to stop Turkey's use of the airspace.

This week, Iraqi politics have been taking place through the law courts. By custom, Iraq's presidency – a largely symbolic post – is held by a Kurd. Both the KDP and the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) nominated candidates, and, last Sunday, Iraq's Supreme Court declared the KDP's candidate invalid due to corruption charges against him. However, the KDP made a new nomination the same day. The KDP leader, Masoud Barzani, is also in coalition negotiations with Muqtada al-Sadr, whose party won the biggest block of MPs. The anticipated consolidation of KDP power cannot be good news for the Kurdistan Region's battered democracy, nor for those opposed to the party's conservative tribal politics. No doubt, it is welcomed by the KDP's friends in Turkey.

At the same time, however, another Supreme Court decision has driven a new wedge between Iraq's Federal Government and the Kurdistan Region. The court has ruled the 2007 oil and gas law unconstitutional, under which the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has assumed ownership of the oil and gas produced in the region. Under this law, the KDP, which dominates the Regional Government, made its 2014 deal with Turkey to export the region's oil through a pipeline to Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan (from which a

large share is sold to Israel). This deal has given Turkey control of the region's main source of income and, thus, substantial political leverage. Bagdad has an ongoing case against the Turkey deal in the International Chamber of Commerce, and the Supreme Court decision will feed into the Chamber case. Oil revenues have been at the centre of budget disputes between the federal and regional governments, and Rudaw reports another delay in budget payments from Bagdad to Erbil (Hewlêr). The KRG has responded to previous budget disputes by delaying and cutting civil service salaries, generating major protests. There must be many people hoping that this pattern will not be repeated.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the courts and 'justice' system have often been seen to be doing the bidding of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This week, two more prisoners went on hunger strike to protest their ill treatment. Mazlum Dağ and Abdurrahman Er have spent two years on death row, and their rights to see their families and to send and receive letters have been restricted. The young men were found guilty of the murder for which the people of Maxmur are suffering collective punishment. There has been an international campaign against the KRG's continued use of the death penalty, which requires consent from the Kurdistan President for execution; but, so far, the campaign is without success.

## **Syria**

Iraqi instability has its roots in the devastation of the Gulf War, where the US showed that winning a war is not the same as winning the peace. In the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, hard work and huge sacrifice have demonstrated what is possible when people focus on building up a new society; and this has brought hope, not just to the Middle East but across the world. However, many forces do not want this society to succeed, and if they get their way, instability could take over here too.

Recent history is replete with terrifying examples of the cumulative impact of drought, economic collapse, and external aggression. A new report by Dutch peace organisation, PAX, on the situation facing North-East Syria, makes the dangers explicit. This area was the breadbasket of Syria, and the majority of

the working population was directly employed in agriculture. Now, the region's pastoralists and farmers are facing a perfect storm, but, in this case, many of their difficulties are man-made, and the possible consequences are wide-reaching. 2021 was a year of exceptionally low rainfall across the wider region, which itself can, at least partly, be attributed to climate change. In addition, the water shortage in North-East Syria has been made much worse by the aggressive actions taken by Turkey and its mercenaries. The PAX report says surprisingly little about Turkey's withholding of the Euphrates water, but it does emphasise their damming of the river Khabur and stopping of the Alok pumping station. And it also looks at the impact of the war and the battered economy on the herders and farmers.

The huge fall in value of the Syrian pound, combined with and exacerbated by US sanctions, makes imports of such things as fertilizers or seed prohibitive. War directly disrupts access to grazing lands and markets, and fear of further aggression makes farmers unwilling to plant and invest.

Crop yields have fallen drastically, pushing up food prices. This also results in less (and more expensive) agricultural waste for animal feed. Half-starved animals sell for very little, and, anyway, fewer people can afford to buy much meat.

The resulting pressures on a way of life already under stress and on communities that have gone through a decade of war can lead to growing crime and the breakdown of old solidarities.

The Autonomous Administration – still battling ISIS and the constant Turkish aggression, economically isolated, and having to rebuild war-torn infrastructure – cannot provide the level of help needed. And there is no shortage of external forces ready to stoke people's resulting frustration with the authorities.

Of course, the biggest and most intractable obstacle in the way of finding a solution to all this is the Syrian civil war itself and President Assad's determination to retain control and make no concessions to greater democracy or regional autonomy. In this, he has been facing renewed

resistance from As-Suwayda, a majority Druze area at the opposite end of Syria from the Autonomous Administration. North-East Syria's Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) has reached out to the people of this south-western region, where there has been growing protest and civil disobedience against the government, triggered by the withdrawal of a government subsidy at a time of increasingly harsh economic conditions. Along with falling living standards, As-Suwayda's protestors highlight corruption and the Syrian constitution's lack of recognition for the Druze. For the SDC, the protests are a revival of the revolution of 2011 "that calls for a decent living and preserves its dignity" – a revival from the time before that earlier revolution "deviated from its path when it [became] dominated by political Islam, and later by terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Nusra, and the mercenary factions that branched off from them which move by the orders and agendas of the Turkish occupation." The SDC calls on the people of As-Suwayda not to allow themselves to be drawn from the peaceful path of democratic change. They call on the international community, especially Russia, to restrain Damascus from responding with violence.

The Autonomous Authority is especially responsive to the region's demands for local autonomy, a devolution of power that they see as providing the possibility of a settlement for the whole of Syria. However, Damascus is more likely to respond positively to the protestors' focus on boosting economic activity and giving some recognition to the Druze – the two main points that the spiritual leader of the Druze in Israel has raised on behalf of the people of As-Suwayda with the Russian Foreign minister in Moscow.

North-east Syria continues to face attacks from both Turkey and ISIS, but as the reaction to Öcalan's capture makes clear, the Kurdish Freedom Movement does not easily give up. More than that, even in the most unpropitious of circumstances, they try to move beyond defence to build for a better future. While fending off these attacks, the Autonomous Administration has been holding meetings to finalise the draft of a revised Social Contract (which functions like a constitution), and they have also been drafting rules for elections that have previously had to be postponed due to Turkey's invasions.



And finally, this week's sitting of the European Parliament passed two motions highly critical of Turkey, with one recommending formal suspension of accession negotiations if Turkey's political trajectory does not undergo a rapid reversal – although it still talks about intensified engagement over anti-terrorism. And Turkey's opposition is enjoying the new song by hugely popular singer/songwriter Tarkan, "Geçcek" (This shall pass), with its clear, if deliberately ambiguous, message of hope: "We fell but we got up, didn't we? Didn't we always challenge destiny? You rest easy. We got over so many things before. It will pass."