

# Terrorism: the power of a word – a weekly news review

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Last Thursday, the EU's Court of Justice in Luxembourg witnessed the next stage of the PKK versus the European Union. In December 2001, in response to the US-declared War on Terror that followed "9/11" and the subsequent UN Security Council resolution, the Council of the European Union agreed to a "Common Position" on the "application of specific measures to combat terrorism". This attempted to define a terrorist act, and it included an initial list of individuals and groups the Council regarded as terrorists. In 2002, the PKK was added to that list. This took place at a time when the PKK was calling for peace negotiations and had publicly dissolved its old organisation. The EU's

action encouraged Turkey to respond to this call for peace, not with dialogue but with repression. Whenever Turkey attacks the PKK, or when they clamp down on anyone who advocates on behalf of the Kurds by accusing them of having links with the PKK, the EU's listing of the PKK is always mentioned in support of Turkey's action.

In 2014, the EU terrorism regulation was updated, and the PKK launched legal action against the listing. The position of the Council has been backed by the UK government, as well as by the European Commission. Over four years after the start of the case, in November 2018, the Luxembourg court found that the EU had failed to give sufficient reasons for the listing. However, because it had already been renewed, the court's decision only applied to earlier years, and the listing was allowed to continue on a technicality.

The Council appealed the decision – also supported by France this time – and, last year, the appeal court rejected the earlier decision and called for a retrial, as the other arguments made by the PKK's lawyers had not been discussed. At the same time, the PKK submitted a case that brought the issue up to date so as to question the current situation. This week's hearing looked at both these points. The judge was critical of the EU Council for copy-paste recycling of old arguments without taking account of changing circumstances and for its emphasis on the view in Washington, and there was discussion about the right to self-determination; however, a realistic assessment of the organisations involved should temper undue optimism. It will be months before the judgement is expected.

The Belgian courts have ruled, in a different case, that the PKK should be considered not as a terrorist organisation but as a non-state actor in a war and thus subject to the laws of war rather than civil law. This has been quoted by the PKK's lawyers; however, decisions over what organisations are deemed as terrorists are ultimately taken on political grounds.

These decisions are important because the word "terrorist" has such strong emotional resonance. The common-sense understanding of the term is more specific than the EU definition. It is associated in people's minds with deadly violence against civilians. The political decision to label a group as terrorists

thus gets refracted through an ethical prism to make that group seem unsupportable. It is a powerful weapon of propaganda.

### **War and unrest in Iraq**

The PKK has been listed by the United States since 1997. The capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999 was carried out by a CIA-led international conspiracy, and the United States has been fully supportive of Turkey's attacks in the mountains of northern Iraq, where the PKK guerrillas have their bases. While claiming to be targeting PKK "terrorists", Turkey has tightened its control over the Kurdistan Region of Iraq with an extensive and expanding network of military bases, and their attacks have forced the emptying, or near emptying, of hundreds of villages.

These attacks are carried out with the knowledge and backing of the United States and with the increasingly active support of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. The KDP has a history of unscrupulous alliances in pursuit of power – they even called on the support of Saddam Hussein just eight years after he gassed thousands of Kurds in Halabja. In pursuing their own economic and political gains, the KDP have allowed themselves to become so dependent on Turkey that they now act as vassals of the Turkish state. Their business-friendly approach, combined with their oil wealth and strategic location, also makes them popular with the US and European countries.

Last Saturday, the Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union (KCK), which includes the PKK, issued a warning that the KDP was preparing to collaborate with Turkey in a joint assault on the mountain bases. This has been corroborated by further reports of the KDP building up its military deployment in the area after meetings between leading figures from Turkey and the KDP. The KCK claims to have information that the first move will be a black flag operation that will be blamed on the PKK and give the KDP the excuse to attack the PKK directly. Up until now, the KDP has generally played only a supportive role in Turkey's war. They don't want to be seen to attack the PKK without provocation, and the PKK avoids confronting the KDP. The KCK called

on the KDP “not to participate in this dirty war of occupation of the Turkish state... which would be a huge disaster for our entire country.”

Those who want to make war on the PKK portray this as an ideological struggle against the dark forces of terrorism. There is indeed a strong ideological element, but it isn't this. The US and Europe give support to Turkey for their own strategic reasons, but in addition, there is no love lost for a movement that puts forward an alternative to capitalism and that refuses to conform to the norms of liberal democracy. And what better way to dismiss the ideology of Öcalan and the PKK and make it appear untouchable than by labelling those who support it as terrorists?

Öcalan's ideology was taken up by the Yazidis in Şengal – learnt from the PKK and the Syrian Kurdish YPG and YPJ, who, together, helped them recover their land from ISIS and set up their own autonomous government. The ideological warriors of liberal democracy don't want this to survive. Without the involvement of the Yazidis, the United States helped broker an agreement, supported by the United Nations, for Şengal to be taken under the joint control of the KDP and Iraq's federal government – the same forces that abandoned them to ISIS in 2014. So far, the Yazidis have resisted giving up their autonomy. The Iraqi government is now applying new pressure through the erection of a border wall to separate the people of Şengal from their comrades in Syria. The government claims it is to keep out ISIS, but there is nothing similar along other parts of the border. Construction began in mid-March, and there are also plans, currently suspended, for a razor-wire fence isolating Şengal from the surrounding Arab villages.

These siege conditions can be compared to recent developments at the Maxmur refugee camp, whose residents originally came to Iraq from Turkey in the 1990s to escape Turkish government attacks on their villages and which is self-administered according to Öcalan's philosophy. The Iraqi authorities backed down from surrounding the camp with barbed wire but have now built a series of watchtowers in front of it. Maxmur camp has also been blockaded by the KDP since July 2019.

Iraq's government is divided, weak, and unable to resist external influence. Both Şengal and Maxmur have been attacked by Turkish drones, and the Iraqi government has put up only a token complaint about this invasion of their sovereign territory.

Following last October's election, Iraqi politicians have still not succeeded in forming a new government. The first stage should be the selection of a president. By convention, this should be a Kurd, and previous presidents have been from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This time, with the KDP forming a block with the Sadrists and Sunnis, it seemed that the KDP candidate would be selected, but the vote – due to take place last Wednesday – was boycotted by other groups, including the pro-Iranian parties and the PUK, so lacked the necessary quorum. The tense atmosphere between the parties literally caught fire on Sunday night when supporters of the pro-Iranian Hashd al-Shaabi militias stormed the KDP headquarters in Baghdad and set the building alight.

### **“Secessionists”**

Another word that is used to attack the PKK, and the Kurds more generally, is “secessionists”, even though, in the early 2000s, the PKK moved from demanding independence to demanding autonomy that minimised the role of the state but did not redraw borders. Nation-states and their organisations don't, as a rule, like secessionism, but there are exceptions, depending on the circumstances, and Western institutions were happy to encourage the break-up of former Yugoslavia. Attitudes depend on political considerations. An autonomous region that attempts to establish an alternative model to capitalism will not receive support from the capitalist states – and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has not been given formal recognition nor a seat in international discussions on Syria's future. In contrast, the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was initially made possible by the protection of a no-fly zone guaranteed by the US, the UK and France, though full independence of the region was not given international support. Iraq's federal constitution, which recognises Kurdish autonomy, would also allow autonomy in Şengal, but an autonomy that bases itself on Öcalan's ideas does not get support from the “international community”.

## **According to Amnesty International**

Words and stories matter. Even documents that claim objectivity can feed into the dominant narrative, and their supposed neutrality makes them even more powerful. Amnesty International's annual report, released last week, provides a worrying example. The report includes some strong criticism, especially when looking at the situation in Iran, though, even so, it gives no indication of the extent of economic deprivation and pervasive securitisation in Iran's Kurdish regions. It also comes down hard on the attacks on freedom of expression and association made by the Kurdistan Regional Government, which Amnesty has followed in some detail. However, the report is also noticeable for what it doesn't say.

To anyone not already familiar with what is happening, the Turkey chapter would provide little illumination. Many cases are given – though how these have been selected is unclear – but there is no attempt to contextualise them nor to explain the background to all the “terrorism” charges. And Kurds get only a couple of passing mentions.

While the Iraq chapter mentions Turkish attacks “targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party”, it doesn't comment on Turkey's intensive militarisation of the northern regions or the thousands of civilians who have been forced to flee their villages and homesteads to escape the Turkish attacks. Nor does it mention assassinations of Iranian dissidents who had escaped to the Kurdistan Region.

But the most misleading chapter with respect to Kurdish politics is that concerning Syria. Legitimate criticisms can be levelled at the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as against administrations facing much less difficult circumstances, but the Administration is guided by the rule of law and by a social contract – which Amnesty should be promoting – that calls for women's rights, minority rights and grassroots democracy. Meanwhile, the Turkish occupied regions and Idlib have become gangster strongholds where different militias compete for pillage and where those residents who have not fled live in fear of kidnap, rape, and all forms of gratuitous violence. However, a reader of this report who had no other

information would get the impression that the situations in Northeast Syria and these other areas were on a par.

Further, no mention is made of the hardship and instability caused by Turkey's continued attacks (in breach of ceasefire agreements), of Turkey's cutting of the vital water flow in the Euphrates, or of how ISIS is regrouping within the protection of the Turkish occupied areas. Battle-scarred Northeast Syria, which lost over 11,000 people in the fight against ISIS, is now expected to look after ISIS prisoners and families from across the world with minimal outside help or interest. The Administration has repeatedly called for international involvement, but Amnesty's response is to lay all the problems with the camps housing ISIS families at the Administration's own door.

In a reminder of how dangerous this approach is, local security services (Asayish) have reported that they were ambushed in Al Hol camp on Monday night when three of their vehicles were damaged by guns and RPGs. At least three people are believed to have been killed in firefights, and a would-be suicide bomber was arrested. There have been fears of a large-scale ISIS attack on Al Hol similar to that attempted on the prison in Hasakah in January. While the repatriation of small groups of women and children to their original countries continues – 10 women and 22 children left Roj Camp for Germany last week – this is not enough to have much impact overall.

Last week, like every other, produced enough stories for its own Amnesty report from Turkey, but there is no space to detail them here.

At the same time, Turkey has continued to enjoy its prominence as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine, and to emphasise its strategic importance to NATO, and hopes to use this to persuade other NATO countries to end their restrictions on selling Turkey arms, as Fehim Tastekin reports for Al Monitor.

## **Around the world**

This week, I have focused on the importance of how events are portrayed, and I want to end by drawing attention to three stories from different parts of the world. The first – which raises questions about the role of the social media

giants – is a brief, worrying article from Turkey Purge. Ahmet Dönmez is an exiled Turkish journalist who has been critical of the Turkish government's links to the mafia. A violent attack by an unidentified mob left him in intensive care in a Stockholm hospital. A few days later, Twitter suspended his account.

The second is an article from Human Rights Watch, recording that, even as Poland welcomes Ukrainian refugees, the Polish authorities have been arresting volunteers who are trying to help those from other parts of the world who have managed to get across the fortified Belarus border into the cold damp of the Polish forest.

The third is a story of the power of human resistance in the face of a system that regards immigrants as less than human. Like Behrouz Boochani, who wrote of his own experiences in the award-winning “No Friend but the Mountains”, Mostafa Azimitabar and Farhad Bandesh are Kurdish refugees from Iran who were incarcerated on Australia's Manus Island. Both painted in detention, and both have submitted self-portraits to the Archibald Prize.

I end with another example of terrorism charges being misused to stigmatise the Kurdish struggle. This is from France, where an anarchist, known as “Libre Flot”, who fought alongside the YPG against ISIS, has spent fifteen months in prison waiting for trial – isolated and with little access for visitors. On 27 February, in response to the authorities' continued refusal to release him, he began a hunger strike. He is now in hospital, seriously weakened but kept alive by a drip. In the letter in which he announced his hunger strike, he described the Kafkaesque process through which he is being accused of being the leader of “a criminal association planning a terrorist attack”. He writes that he doesn't know the other people in the alleged association and describes how the investigating judge delights in referring to ISIS as Libre Flot's ‘friends’. The letter ends, “I recently learned from the mouth of the director of detentions..., whom I thank for his frankness, that my placement and my maintenance in solitary confinement were decided from the first day by very high ranking people and that whatever I say or he says or does, nothing will be done about it, that it is beyond him, the file will not even be read and I will remain in the



solitary confinement area and that in any case nothing could change before the presidential elections.”

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