

# Freedom struggles – a weekly news review

The PKK, founded 45 years ago on Monday, has given birth to all the different organisations that make up the Kurdish Freedom Movement. Terrorist listing allowed the London celebrations of this anniversary to be attacked by the police. By contrast, Japan has shortened their list of international terrorist organisations to exclude the PKK – along with other groups such as Hamas. This week's review also looks at the nature of Hamas; the hypocrisy of Turkey's words of support for Palestine while they continue to trade with Israel; the impact of current events on North and East Syria - especially as described by the SDF's Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi; judicial corruption in Turkey; and some frightening statistics from Iran.

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Despite 100 years of oppression, Kurdish communities everywhere have a pride in their culture, which they are determined to defend. They have organised the only genuinely oppositional politics in Turkey, and they are responsible for a democratic haven in North and East Syria, whose grassroots feminist politics are looked to for inspiration all around the world. This has been made possible by the foundation, 45 years ago last Monday, of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK. When Abdullah Öcalan and a small group of comrades founded the party in Turkey in 1978, it was another Marxist-Leninist liberation movement, and it aimed to form a Kurdish republic. But the PKK changed with the wider political situation and – more importantly – through the evolution of new ideas about society and organisation. It now calls for radical social change that does not directly challenge state boundaries. Öcalan himself has been in a Turkish prison for nearly 25 years, after abduction in an international plot, but the movement he leads has grown, and he has used his time in prison to develop the ideas that underly that movement. These ideas – whose central pillars are radical inclusive democracy, women's rights and ecology – have given birth to many different organisations in the different parts of Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora, including the pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey, the political parties and defence organisations that created the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the Free Life Party (PJAK) in Iranian Kurdistan, and Kurdish organisations across Europe. For all these organisations and their members, the anniversary of the PKK is a time to celebrate in proper Kurdish style, with food, music and dancing, interspersed with politics.

### **Anti-terrorism laws**

Kurdish communities everywhere [partied](#) in their community centres and hired halls without bothering anyone, but in London, a posse of [anti-terrorism police](#) attempted to disrupt the celebrations of the Kurdish People's Democratic Assembly in Haringey. The intruders were forced into an angry retreat after it was found that they had no arrest warrant that would entitle them to enter the building. Assembly members point out that this police raid came just three days after the defence ministers of the UK and Turkey had [signed an agreement](#) that the UK minister noted "will see our relationship

go from strength to strength and enhance our nations' defence and security co-operation."

The excuse given by the British police for their raid was the presence of PKK flags. This can be treated as a problem because the UK – like the United States and the European Union – has bowed to Turkish pressure and labelled the PKK a terrorist organisation. The restrictions this implies are interpreted differently in different countries, but everywhere, the PKK's terrorism label effects Kurds' ability to carry out all forms of political organisation, or even to feel safe to join community activities, and it enables Turkey to continue to persecute Kurds with impunity. There have been long campaigns against the PKK's terrorist listing, which have taken encouragement from the ruling by Belgium's highest court that the PKK is not a terrorist organisation but a party to a non-international armed conflict. However, terrorist listing decisions are made on political rather than legal grounds, and there is no agreed definition of what terrorism is.

There was much excitement, this week, when it was noticed that Japan had [removed the PKK](#) from their list of international terrorist organisations. This change is unrelated to any campaigns or to the PKK anniversary. Japan's Public Security Intelligence Agency has decided that, rather than rely on inconsistent lists from overseas think tanks, they will use the much shorter list designated by the United Nations Security Council. They still discuss the PKK under [regional terrorism situations](#).

### **The nature of Hamas**

Hamas, too, has disappeared from Japan's international terrorist list but remains in the regional discussion section. They are not active outwith Israel-Palestine. Nevertheless, Hamas considers civilians legitimate targets. Rocket attacks target civilian areas, and many civilians were killed on 7 October, even if an increasing number of those deaths are now being attributed to Israeli tanks and helicopters that killed hostages along with their captors. Just two days ago, Hamas was happy to claim responsibility for a [shooting at a Jerusalem bus stop](#) that killed three people.

All statements from the PKK and wider Kurdish movement make clear that, although they support and have always supported the Palestinian cause, they consider the actions of Hamas both wrong and counterproductive. As Mustafa Karasu put it in an [interview](#) from 15 November “The war in Gaza is really being waged in a very ugly way. What Hamas is doing is surely unacceptable, but what Israel is doing right now is really inhumane... Of course, it is necessary to stand against this. But we need to be consistent... Those who do not accept crimes against humanity need to oppose it correctly and should do so consistently.”

However, Hamas cannot be equated to the violent gangsterism of ISIS, as Israel has attempted to do. They are an organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood – a movement with a long and developed tradition, and one that poses a very different challenge for those who do not subscribe to their beliefs and who argue for a secular society. The Muslim Brotherhood claims that a Muslim must be guided by faith in every aspect of life, including politics, and that Islam prescribes how society should be organised for everyone. If we believe in freedom of thought, we cannot demand that they forget their fundamental beliefs when they enter the political arena; we can only try and persuade the majority of the value of secular democracy.

Hamas was able to win elections in Gaza in 2006 because the PLO had become discredited and compromised. Hamas had built trust through social work in local communities, and was able to present themselves as the only real resistance to Israeli colonialism. Under their watch, Gazan society has become more religiously conservative, and autocratic, and there have been complaints about Hamas leaders living in luxury while the masses struggle – but blame for daily hardships can always be laid at the door of Israel and their brutal sixteen-year blockade of the Gaza strip.

## **Turkey and Palestine**

Hamas’s attempt to fuse nationalism and Islam resonates with Turkey’s President Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP), and vocal support for the Palestinian cause boosts Erdoğan’s image as a global Islamic

leader, but his failure to match his words with actions is becoming increasingly apparent.

Social-media journalist Metin Cihan has been searching the internet for information on Turkish companies continuing to trade with Israel. [He told Bianet](#) that he had found “an entire trade was continuing as if everything was normal.” He claims that one of those involved was Erdoğan’s eldest son. Cihan posted his findings on Twitter along with the [comment](#), “While President Erdoğan was condemning Israel for bombing a hospital on October 17, his son Burak Erdoğan’s company was loading at the Israeli port. On October 28, while he was criticizing Israel and calling people to a rally, his son’s ship was passing the Strait of Gibraltar with its cargo.” Cihan had previously found evidence that he claimed showed trade with Israel by ships linked to politicians from the AKP, and from the far-right Islamist Nationalist parties – the Great Unity Party (BBP) and the Free Cause Party (Hüda-Par).

The Erdoğan family have made a complaint of insult and slander, and Cihan is now under investigation, but that has not stopped him from repeating his allegations and extending them to the son of Binali Yıldırım, the speaker of the Turkish parliament who has also been prime minister and AKP leader. “Again,” Cihan [tweeted](#) on Friday, “a prayer was sent to Palestine and a ship was sent to Israel.”

It has been left to pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples’ Democracy Equality Party (HEDEP) MP Cengiz Cicek to [file a motion](#) for a parliamentary inquiry into Turkey’s diplomatic, commercial and military relations with Israel.

## **North and East Syria**

In the neighbouring Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, Mazloum Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), compares the situation faced by Gaza with that faced by the Autonomous Administration. He [told](#) Amberin Zaman for al-Monitor, “Israel is currently using its full military might in Gaza saying it is determined to ‘wipe out’ Hamas. The Kurds are being similarly confronted by powers that are bent on destroying our existence... Neither the Palestinians nor the Kurds are going to

disappear or give up their struggle for justice no matter what. The Palestinian and Kurdish issues need to be resolved through dialogue, not aggression, and that obviously applies to all sides.” Abdi is concerned that Turkey, which has already destroyed the region’s infrastructure, will use this time when the world is focussed on Gaza to attempt another land invasion. He further observes that the fighting in Gaza has been accompanied by an increase in attacks in Deir ez-Zor by Iranian backed militias and Syrian government forces that are aimed at destabilising the Autonomous Administration.

Abdi also shared his worries about direct spillover from the war in Gaza. He is concerned that the region could become a battlefield between the pro-Iranian militias and the United States, which would “ultimately benefit” ISIS; and that “the conflict in Gaza is providing terror groups like [ISIS with] the opportunity to boost their propaganda and recruitment efforts.”

With respect to the United States, Abdi notes that weakness in the face of Turkey’s attacks is “causing our people to lose faith in the United States... and leading them to question our partnership with them”. However, the possibility of an acceptable agreement with Assad’s Syrian Government that would allow the region to maintain some of its democratic gains seems to get no closer.

The Syrian Government applies especial pressure to the autonomous areas that are physically separated from the rest of the autonomous region: Shehba, where most of the people displaced from Turkish occupied Afrîn have found shelter, and the Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh. These areas are [kept under siege](#) by the Syrian army, which restricts and taxes what goes in. Restrictions on fuel have left the inhabitants of Shehba without electricity for a week.

There are still around 900 US troops in Syria. Their mission is restricted to supporting the SDF in the fight against ISIS, which continues to be very active. However, these troops also act as a deterrent to a further Turkish invasion, as was demonstrated when President Trump began a withdrawal in 2019. The Americans have told Abdi that they do not plan to leave, but [a Trump re-election could change this](#).

This week's news provides further reminders of what Turkish invasion and occupation implies. A report by the Rights Violations Documentation and Law Centre [states that](#), since the beginning of the year, 419 people have been kidnapped in the occupied areas of Afrîn, Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ayn), and Girê Spî (Tell Abyad). In Afrîn, the river has been [polluted](#) with sewage and had water drawn off into Turkey, and more hills continue to be made barren as hundreds more trees are [cut down](#) for firewood. Four teachers were [arrested](#) for refusing to support the Turkification of Afrîn, and six more Syrian prisoners were [illegally transferred](#) to Turkey.

### **Turkey's justice system**

In Turkey itself, every day brings more news stories of the authoritarian misuse of the law.

Large numbers of political activists have been detained. Last Saturday, 21 women were [detained and beaten](#) in Şirnex (Şırnak) when police prevented them from demonstrating against gender-based violence on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. On Monday, 98 people were [detained](#) in house raids in 18 cities. On Tuesday, at least 43 people, including the ill and elderly, were [detained](#) in house raids in Bedlîs (Bitlis) and Wan (Van), another 42 people were [detained](#) in Istanbul, and there were [raids on institutions](#) in Izmir. On Wednesday, six people were [detained](#) in Mersin, and on Friday two people were [beaten and detained](#) in Nusaybin. Mezopotamya Agency [reports](#) that twelve new prisons are planned for 2024 and a further eight for 2025, and that these come on top of a recent massive building programme that has brought the current number of prisons up to 285.

Existing prisoners continue to suffer delays in their release in order to punish them for not repenting their "crimes". Selim Üldes has seen his release date [postponed three times](#) for his refusal to call the PKK a terrorist organisation.

In a demonstration of the blatant manipulation of the witness system, one man has been [shown](#) to have provided witness statements for the cases of



669 individuals in the space of just 32 hours. It has been pointed out that even remembering the names of that number of people is not possible.

When the accused are policemen and there are suggestions of a political murder, the manipulation is of a different kind. The case of the murder of lawyer Tahir Elçi, who was shot while holding a press conference for peace eight years ago this week, has been dogged by grossly inadequate investigation and the court's refusal to hear more evidence. Frustrated lawyers [claim](#) nothing has progressed over three years of legal proceedings and that the only hope of a proper hearing is through the European Court of Human Rights.

A court has supported the government's targeting of the president and council of the Turkish Medical Association, and ruled that they should be [dismissed](#). The head of the Association, Şebnem Korur Fincancı, a well-known human rights defender, came into Erdoğan's sights when she stated that a video of the death throes of two PKK guerrillas supported the need for claims of Turkey's use of chemical weapons to be properly investigated.

The government has [frozen the assets](#) of twenty Kurdish foundations and associations and 62 individuals, accusing them of funding terrorism. These are mainly much-needed humanitarian organisations, including branches of Heyva Sor, the Kurdish Red Moon.

Last week, I discussed the attempt to appeal to Kurdish voters by Özgür Özel, the new leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), and his homage to the Kurdish Soprano, Pervin Chakar. Özel has continued to raise Kurdish issues, with [criticism](#) of the replacement of elected Kurdish mayors by government appointed trustees. But, in the backlash against Özel's praise, the state broadcaster has [deleted](#) all Chakar's recordings from its archive.

### **The Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

Judicial abuse has also become a problem in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Concern is continuing to grow for Süleyman Ahmet, editor of the Arabic



Service of Roj News, who was [detained](#) by Kurdistan Democratic Party border guards on 25 October as he returned from a family visit to Syria. He has not been heard from since and no reason has been given for his arrest.

Meanwhile, the leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government are in Dubai for COP28, [talking about climate change](#) together with leaders of other oil-based economies.

## **Iran**

Wider geopolitics, and shifting political alliances amid challenges to American world dominance, have allowed Iran to acquire a new importance. This was recognised in the [cancellation](#), this week, by the Institut Français in Istanbul, of a conference on Iran's women's revolution. They were asked by the French embassy not to upset the Iranian government.

That government has now [executed](#) 700 prisoners since the beginning of this year.

In Iran's impoverished Kurdish region, men and boys who have been forced to try and make a living through carrying heavy loads across the mountain borders have come under [intensified attack](#) by Iranian border guards. Six were killed and 105 were wounded by direct fire just this month. And in the Baluch town of Zahedan, where residents have held anti-regime protests every Friday after prayers, a heavy military presence ensured that yesterday's protesters could manage only a [silent march](#) with no banners. But they have not given up on their determination to resist.

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