

The CHP under the spotlight – a weekly news review

Turkey's political drama continues with the arrest of the Mayor of Esenyurt and his replacement by a government trustee - the first time these tactics have been used against the mainstream opposition CHP. The rationale for recent government actions is still unclear, but the movement for a solution to the Kurdish Question has taken on a certain momentum of its own; and the CHP's response has been generally encouraging. Meanwhile Turkish bombardment has ravaged North and East Syria, Zionists are trying to woo Kurds on social media, and Erdoğan's hypocrisy over Palestine has been further exposed.

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News from Turkey proceeds with more plot twists than a Shakespeare comedy, while instead of Shakespearian cross dressing we see politicians donning each other's political clothes. Cutting through the rhetoric and the theatre to expose underlying beliefs and grand plans is taxing even the most experienced commentators. As Mehmet Tezkan [wrote for Halk TV](#), "there is not a single person who can explain what is happening". This confusion itself may be intentional.

On the one hand is (far-right) Devlet Bahçeli's surprise handshake with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party, and the first contact with imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan in three and a half years. On the other, a further round of devastating unprovoked Turkish attacks on the infrastructure and economic resources of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and continued crackdowns on Kurdish cultural expression and Kurdish political activists. To add to all this, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government, which has been emphasising normalisation of inter-party relations and the importance of internal national unity, has now used their tame judiciary to attack the Republican People's Party (CHP) mayor of Esenyurt, Ahmet Özer, a respected academic who was elected last March with 49% of the vote.

The arrest of a CHP mayor

On Wednesday morning, Özer was detained in a dawn raid on his home, and later that day, he was remanded in custody, charged with membership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). On Thursday morning, his place was taken by a government-appointed trustee, Can Aksoy, who had been hastily appointed İstanbul's Deputy Governor in readiness. It was a scenario with which DEM Party politicians are only too familiar – [most recently in Hakkâri](#) – but for the CHP, Turkey's main opposition party, this was a new experience.

As the [president of the Diyarbakır Bar Association put it](#), "It is meaningless to seek a legal basis" for Özer's arrest. According to information leaked to pro-government media, but not made available to his lawyers, an investigation against him was launched in July based on a 10-year-old claim. If this claim had been considered a real problem, he would not have been allowed to stand for election. Ali Duran Topuz [observes in Artı Gerçek](#), "The investigation is secret, of course, but this investigation was carried out almost live, the accusations were elaborately detailed on pro-government television."

The significance of Esenyurt, a municipality of one million people on the west side of İstanbul, is summed up by Topuz: "Esenyurt is not only the largest district in Turkey. It is perhaps the only settlement in the Western metropolitan cities where Kurds are the majority. It is the most important district of the CHP-DEM Party consensus that ensured the "opposition victory" in the last local elections. And an addition: Before being elected mayor, Ahmet Bey was an advisor to the Metropolitan Municipality Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu." (İmamoğlu is seen as the most likely challenger to the presidency. Özer's candidature as mayor was endorsed by the DEM Party.)

The CHP response

In this last month, the CHP has found itself having to respond to the government's seemingly contradictory moves, as well as to the PKK's fatal attack on Turkish Aerospace Industries in Ankara. CHP leader Özgür Özel has portrayed his party as more serious about peace than the governing alliance of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Bahçeli's Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). But he needs to do this without alienating too many supporters and active party members who have been indoctrinated with the idea that any concession towards Kurds is equivalent to treachery. The party is proud to be the inheritors of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's Turkish nationalism. They opposed Erdoğan's 2009 "Kurdish Opening", and objected to Erdoğan's government interacting with Öcalan and the PKK in the "Resolution Process" of 2013-15. However, following Erdoğan's volte face and adoption of a military "solution", it is the CHP that has been the focus of Kurdish hopes for mainstream change, even as CHP politicians have been wary of appearing too close to the HDP (now DEM Party).

At the same time, the CHP is always defensive of the army, and after the PKK attack, Özel [described the PKK's target](#) – Turkish Aerospace Industries – as "the apple of Turkey's eye". More worryingly, he went out of his way to distance himself from the image, raised by Bahçeli, of Öcalan speaking in the Turkish parliament.

The removal of Ahmet Özer has brought opposition parties together in the defence of democracy. Thursday's mass protest rally in Esenyurt was addressed by [DEM Party co-chair Tulay Hatimoğulları](#), as well as by CHP-leader Özel, who called on Erdoğan to [seek a democratic mandate through a new election](#), and İstanbul mayor, İmamoğlu, who described the government as having a stick in its hand and pursuing a dark move. On Friday, [Erdoğan filed a law suit against İmamoğlu](#), claiming that this description was slanderous, and demanding a million Turkish Lira in damages. There were [demonstrations for Özer and democracy in other cities too](#), with active support from numerous civil society organisations.

A notable absence from Esenyurt was [the mayor of Ankara, Mansur Yavaş](#), who comes from the right wing of the party and is a rival future presidential candidate to İmamoğlu. He excused himself as attending a funeral that day. The notoriously racist CHP mayor of Bolu, Tanju Özcan, was not only absent from the protest but [reluctant to comment on social media](#).

Talking about peace talks

Özer's arrest is hardly a promising sign for those looking for evidence that the Turkish Government is serious in its references to a new peace opening. [Erdoğan's message](#) to the AKP Group meeting on Wednesday made clear that he has no intention to end Turkey's attacks in North and East Syria or in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and nor does he intend to speak with the PKK in Qandil. Further, he sidelined organised Kurdish political representation, stating, "Our primary interlocutor is our Kurdish brothers themselves". This seems to be a form of brotherhood dictated by the Turkish state, and

with no sign of lifting Kurdish cultural oppression, it is difficult to see how this differs from the long-established view that Kurds are acceptable so long as they act like Turks.

This message followed [Republic Day statements](#) the previous day, in which Erdoğan framed his vision for Turkey within a security framework. Özel, for the CHP, highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusivity, and the DEM Party called for Turkey to become a democratic republic.

The role the government, via Bahçeli, has assigned to Öcalan seems to be only to disband the PKK. No-one can seriously imagine that he would do this in exchange for his own freedom – as in Bahçeli’s imagined scenario – so we are left to guess the intention behind Bahçeli’s statement and the permission for a family visit.

Having said this, the idea that new peace talks could be possible has developed a certain momentum of its own, independent of what might have been originally intended. Özel’s response on behalf of the CHP has fed into this, and CHP empathy should itself have been strengthened by the arrest of their mayor. DEM Party co-chair Tuncer Bakırhan has [observed](#) in an interview for Yeni Yaşam Newspaper, “Having a meeting with Mr Öcalan after so many years has created hope and excitement in everyone who is in favour of peace and solution, because every sound coming out of İmralı [Öcalan’s prison] is like a stone thrown into still water. Suddenly politics becomes active, and the possibility of solution and peace is being discussed.”

In North and East Syria

When I wrote last week, Turkish shells were still raining down on North and East Syria. After five days, the intense bombardment stopped, leaving only the intermittent shelling that Turkey has directed against the area ever since their 2019 invasion. Yet again the Autonomous Administration is looking at a landscape of destroyed power stations, burnt out oil wells, ruined silos and bakeries, destroyed factories. Thousands of people are without electricity, there is [no fuel for water pumps](#), and the cost of repairing all the damage [would run into millions of dollars](#). Besides the dead and wounded, psychological damage is unmeasurable; and the instability Turkey has so deliberately created will trigger a cascade of knock-on effects, including discouraging vital investment and encouraging the growth of ISIS. The region’s residents live in fear of another similar attack.

Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of North and East Syria’s Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) [argues that](#) Turkey’s primary goal is to “destroy the Autonomous Administration, undermine security and stability in our areas, and forcibly displace our people from their cities and villages.” Turkey’s excuse given for these attacks is that the people who carried out the attack on the Ankara arms manufacturer came from North and East Syria. Abdi firmly denies any link to the PKK attackers, and points out that “No one from our territory has entered Turkish territory, and the Turkish state cannot provide any evidence to substantiate its claims.” It has now been shown that the two PKK militants [arrived in Ankara from Sivas](#) and there is a suggestion that they may have entered Turkey via Iran.

The SDF has responded to the bombardment with [attacks on Turkish bases](#) in the Turkish occupied areas of Syria.

ISIS sleeper cells continue to threaten the region, and the [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights records](#) that “ISIS carried out 19 operations, including armed attacks and explosions, in areas controlled by SDF. Those operations left three fatalities: a man and two members of military formations operating in SDF-controlled areas.” The SDF, with the support of the Americans, continue to unearth ISIS cells and arrest the fighters. On Tuesday they [uncovered a cell within al Hol camp](#) and captured two ISIS fighters.

Resources have become even further stretched by the presence of returnees and refugees who have escaped Israel’s bombardment in Lebanon. There are also fears that government-held parts of Syria, too, [may come under more intense Israeli attack](#). Self-preservation has forced President Assad to keep silent as Israel has attacked Syrian targets related to Hezbollah, and even when Israel knocked out Syria’s air defence system as a prelude to their attack on Iran a week ago. However, he may come under more pressure from Iran to give Hezbollah active support, which could then prompt Israel to attempt his removal. [An Israeli minister has already threatened](#) that Israel may target Assad’s government if Syria continues (as Israel claims) to facilitate the transfer of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.

There were two conferences on the future of Syria held this week. One, [in Brussels](#), promoted a decentralised system maximising regional autonomy on the lines of the Autonomous Administration. The other was organised in Erbil (Hewler), in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, by the Kurdish National Council (ENKS), an opposition group in North and East Syria that is backed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and by Turkey. Scharo Maroof has pointed out that the [conference photograph shows](#) the representative of ENKS seated next to a commander from the Sultan Murad Forces – one of the most brutal militias in the Turkish backed “Syrian National Army”.

The Israel factor

There have been many words written about how Israel’s attacks could alter the power balances within the region, and the possible impacts for the Kurds, but there has been much less discussion of Israel’s attempts to woo Kurdish sympathies – attempts that start with Benyamin Netanyahu’s criticisms of Erdoğan. (Both leaders accuse the other of brutal oppression of a stigmatised ethnic group.)

Zionist internet warriors try and suggest a natural empathy between Kurds and Jews as peoples who have experienced nationlessness and exclusion, and to exploit Kurds’ post-ISIS distrust of Islamic radicalism. While the Kurdish Freedom Movement is very clear in its support for the Palestinian people, Kurds are not immune from the temptation to welcome support wherever it comes from and to see an alliance with the powerful force of US-backed Israel as a route out of their current impasse – and mainstream media presents this as quite acceptable. However, even if Kurds were able

to achieve greater prominence this way, gains thus won would be tainted from the start and couldn't provide the basis of a just society.

In Turkey there have been more exposures of Erdoğan's deceit in claiming to have ended Turkish exports to Israel. Using publicly accessible sources, Metin Cihan has demonstrated how Turkey [has continued to export vital goods](#) that feed Israel's war machine and colonial expansion – such as barbed wire, steel, and concrete – simply by relabelling them as going to Palestine. On Thursday, protestors discovered an Israeli ship loading in an Istanbul port. Video of the protest shows one of the private guards protecting the ship firing shots into the air. Erdoğan's hypocrisy over Palestine already lost the AKP support in March's local elections, and it has only become starker and better known. Erdoğan's spell over Turkey is weakening, but this may make him more desperate and more dangerous.

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