

# Erdoğan on the warpath – a weekly news review

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Only in Turkey could a bungled “rescue mission” by state forces that left the 13 prisoners it was supposed to save dead, lead to the detention of over 700 people with no relation to those involved, and to threats to invade two neighbouring countries.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has only one response to every set-back, whether the problem is declining popularity, mass protests, or military defeat. He goes on the attack, and he especially attacks the Kurds. This last week has seen Turkish aggression move up a gear. He has clamped down even further on opposition politicians and activists, and let loose threats of further attacks on Iraq and Syria.

This time last week, Turkish jets were bombing Garê Mountain in the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)-controlled area of South (Iraqi) Kurdistan, and Turkish helicopters were bringing in Turkish troops to fight the PKK on the ground. Then, on Sunday, Turkey announced that their mission was complete, that their aim had been to rescue Turkish soldiers and policemen held prisoner by the PKK since 2015-16, and that they had now found the bodies of the men in a cave. Full of righteous anger and demands for support, Erdoğan

told the world that they had been shot by their PKK captors, and he called on western nations to make a choice either to back Turkey or the “terrorists”.

The truth, of course, is somewhat different.

In a video interview made on Tuesday, the PKK’s Duran Kalkan warned that the belated focus on the prisoners was a ploy by the Turkish state to distract from the failure of their attack overall. “Reaching the POWs might have been one goal out of many”, he argued, but “the main target was the HPG Headquarters and the HPG Central Command... Their plan was to kill the members of the Central Command, deal a heavy blow to the guerrillas, and in one way or another take the POWs – if possible”. (The HPG – People’s Defence Forces – is the military wing of the PKK.)

This is in line with Metin Gocan’s report for Al Monitor, which states that “well-placed sources” told them that Turkey’s intention had been to capture or kill leading PKK commanders, Kalkan and Murat Karaliyan, who, they had been told, would be meeting in the caves where the prisoners were held. But the PKK had got wind of their plans.

The PKK has also been adamant that they did not shoot their prisoners, and that the men died as a result of the ferocious attack. They point out that if killing had been their aim, they could have done this at any time. They have always successfully negotiated prisoner releases with the government in the past, and they were certainly very aware of the danger that their deaths could be used by Turkey as an excuse for more attacks. More than a year ago, HPG Commander Mahir Deniz told Firat News Agency: “The Turkish state, which takes no action to take back its security personnel in HPG captivity, has even tried to locate these Turkish personnel and kill them in air raids ... They will kill the captives in air raids and accuse us by announcing the incident to the public opinion as ‘PKK killed our policemen and soldiers’”.

In a detailed statement published on Wednesday, the PKK argued, “It is clear that this operational attack was carried out knowing that no one will survive. For certain, the attack was not aimed at freeing the prisoners, but at destroying them. In addition, it is certain that a permanent deployment in a

strategically important perimeter in Garê was planned". They claim that they were able to see off the Turkish attack due to new tactics and manoeuvrability, but admit to fifteen casualties, including six fighters who were protecting the camp with the prisoners.

The Turkish government had repudiated all requests by the prisoners' families to pursue negotiations, and it is clear that the men's safety was not a government priority. Dead prisoners who can be presented as martyrs also have propaganda value.

Erdoğan has used the dead men as justification for intensifying his attack on the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – continuing his refusal to differentiate between a party that operates within parliamentary norms, and guerrilla forces that have taken up arms. The Turkish police have detained 718 people in forty "anti-terror operations" across the country, including at least 139 HDP members, among them provincial and district chairs. Pre-empting any court decision, the pro-government media reported that 'terrorists were detained'. As the statement from the HDP makes clear, these detentions have nothing to do with the law but are done to garner popular nationalist support.

When Erdoğan took to the stage at his Justice and Development Party (AKP) rally on Monday, his demeanour hardly suited a leader whose armed forces had just returned from a mission in which all those they had gone to rescue had ended up dead. In his determination to cultivate anger against the PKK and all those he links with them, he made a phone call from the podium to give his condolences to the weeping mother of one of the dead prisoners. Rather than show any contrition, he used the rally to repeat his threats of further incursions into Iraq and Syria, telling the delegates, and the watching world, "From now on nowhere is safe for terrorists, neither Qandil nor Sinjar or Syria". As the fate of the residents in the places Turkey has occupied demonstrates, Erdoğan's definition of "terrorists" is very broad indeed.

The next day, he followed this threat with a promise that "Garê has strengthened our determination to establish a secure zone beyond our borders. We will extend our operations to areas where danger exists. We will stay in those areas we secure as long as necessary". As Erdoğan has already

boasted of his ambition to defy existing borders and extend Turkish rule into a large swathe of Syria and Iraq, this should come as no surprise. These expansionist plans are based on Turkey's pre-Treaty of Lausanne ambitions, but they dovetail with their war on the Kurds.

A Turkish intervention in Şengal (or Sinjar) would be aimed at driving out all units of the Yazidi self-defence forces that still remain there despite the agreement made, over the heads of the Yazidis, between South Kurdistan's KDP and the Federal Government of Iraq. As Fehim Taşketin notes in *Al Monitor*, Turkish media claimed that Turkey made a proposal to Iraq for Turkish forces to either join in an invasion of the area or give such an invasion logistical support. But Taşketin observes that Turkey's increasing presence in Iraq is meeting growing resistance, especially from pro-Iranian groups. This raises the possibility of sectarian conflict in a very unstable country.

Turkey is targeting Şengal not only because the Yazidi forces were trained by the PKK and share Ocalan's ideology, and because its disputed status offers an opportunity. The area is also a strategic link in Turkey's wider plans. As Taşketin further explains, Turkey has its eyes on the whole area of north Iraq that borders the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Taking control of this area would allow Turkey to sever links between the Kurds in Syria and the PKK in Iraq's Qandil mountains and would give Turkey a base to attack the Autonomous Administration from the east. Erdoğan is also trying to force the US to stop working with the Kurds in the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which he doesn't distinguish from the PKK. At Monday's AKP rally, he echoed George Bush's post 9/11 warning that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists", announcing "You must not take the side of the terrorists. You have to be on our side".

When the first statement put out by the US in response to the death of the prisoners in Garê showed a reluctance to accept the Turkish Government's authorised version of events, the Turkish Foreign Minister called Secretary of State Antony Blinken and pulled him into line. Where their 14 February statement read "If reports of the death of Turkish civilians at the hands of the PKK, a designated terrorist organization, are confirmed...", the one released

following the phone call, made clear that Blinken “affirmed our view that PKK terrorists bear responsibility”.

On Wednesday, the Pentagon’s Press Secretary reiterated US support for the SDF, but also its tactical limits: “I think you know that our operations in Iraq and Syria are solely focused on countering the still-lingering threat that ISIS poses to the Iraqi people and the Syrian people, and that as we have long said, one of the best ways to ensure a sustainable defeat of ISIS is to do so through local indigenous forces”.

Turkey’s aggression is not confined to the Middle East, or even their other imperial adventures. In a live broadcast on CNN-Türk on Tuesday, the former head of the General Staff’s Intelligence Department, Ismail Hakkı Pekin, not only admitted that the murder of three leading Kurdish women in Paris in 2013, was an operation by the Turkish state – he also called for more of the same. He told viewers, “They also have their elements in Europe. We have to do something in this direction in Europe. I mean, it was already done once in Paris...”

Events in Garê may have been successful in diverting attention from the ongoing mass student protests, but if Erdoğan calculated that Turkey’s second largest party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), would tag along behind him, as they have done with his previous acts of aggression, he made a mistake. In criticising an action that resulted in the deaths of 13 Turkish prisoners, the CHP can still keep their patriotic credentials untarnished, however much Erdoğan tries to implement them as friends of terrorists. CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, told parliament “Normally someone should take responsibility and resign. You go to rescue hostages and they die. The person responsible for our 13 martyrs is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan”. And he asked why the government had not accepted the many offers of help to negotiate the prisoners’ release.

Prominent among those who had offered help with negotiations was the HDP, who had been approached by the men’s families, and who regarded this help as an important part of conflict resolution. The HDP has sent condolences to

the families and has also called on the PKK to release other prisoners that they hold. Whatever the HDP did or said would have little impact on a government determined to drive them out of Turkish politics, but it might be noted by outside observers. However, the mass detention of HDP members and activists has been met by a deafening silence – both from international politicians and from the mainstream media. It is hard to imagine so little attention being given to such a mass silencing of democratic opposition if it was happening in any other major and well-known country.

This has not been a good week for the media all round. The New York Times published an account of Turkish-occupied Afrîn that was such blatant regurgitated Turkish propaganda that the outrage it provoked moved beyond Twitter to a whole critical article in the Jerusalem Post. And in Australia, the latest phase of a battle over advertising royalties has seen Facebook respond to a proposed law requiring them to pay news media for sharing their content, by blocking the sharing of all news posts in Australia, and of all Australian-based news media everywhere. This has effectively deprived alternative news sites of a major vehicle for disseminating their stories. One of the organisations hit is Green Left, who have been important advocates for the Kurdish freedom movement. Recent Green Left stories have not only looked critically at what is happening in the Middle East, but have also reported on motions by local councils in Australia in solidarity with the HDP mayors purged from their elected positions.

Back in the Middle East, three journalists and two activists have been sentenced by a court in Hewler (Erbil) to six years in prison after a trial that has been widely criticised by human rights organisations. The men were all arrested in the October protests against the Kurdistan Regional Government in north Iraq, and at least one, Ayaz Karam, had been critical of the Turkish military presence in the region, which the dominant KDP has been enabling. Masrour Barzani, the region's Prime Minister, had pre-empted the judgement by publicly announcing, in a 10 February press conference, that the people on trial weren't journalists or activists and that some were foreign agents plotting attacks. The security forces recorded the men's occupation as "worker" rather than "journalist" to prevent the application of laws protecting journalists, and

their legitimate journalistic material was used as evidence against them. The verdicts were not a surprise.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, the hounding of journalists never ends, and the authorities no longer feel the need to make the reasons for their arrests look convincing. A moment of black humour was provided by an indictment against five journalists in Van last week, which included the accusation of “never making sports or magazine news”.

Journalists who report on what is actually happening have become more important than ever – as well as being under attack like never before. They need our support, and they also need their work to be analysed and shared so that more people can cut through the tangle of propaganda spewed out by the autocratic regimes that try to silence them. We can all help with that.