

War is peace: Erdoğan's rebranding of aggression as self-defence – a weekly news review

The UN Charter prohibits the use of force, but Article 51 gives an exception for cases of self-defence. There has been a tendency to extend this to include preventative attacks even where there is no immediate threat, and Article 51 is increasingly being called upon to justify acts of aggression. This week's review focuses on Turkey's attacks on North and East Syria, but also looks at Iran's missile strike on Erbil, attacks on the Baluch by both Iran and Pakistan, detentions and violence in Turkish politics, and some political reactions in Europe.

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*Sarah Glynn*

In 1837, a British Canadian militia [crossed the river border](#) into the United States, set fire to a steamboat, loosed it from its moorings, and allowed it to disappear over the Niagara Falls. The name of the boat was the Caroline, and it had been used to carry fighters and supplies to rebels fighting the British Canadian administration. In response to the British claim that they had acted in self-defence, the US Secretary of State [argued](#) that the British government

would have to show “a necessity of self-defence, instant, overwhelming, leaving no choice of means, and no moment for deliberation”; and also that they had done “nothing unreasonable or excessive; since the act, justified by the necessity of self-defence, must be limited by that necessity, and kept clearly within it.”

This formula has become known as the Caroline Doctrine and has become recognised as customary international law governing the right to self-defence.

The Charter of the United Nations, which was adopted in 1945, prohibits the use of force, but the much-quoted Article 51 gives an exception for cases of self-defence, and most people agree that this includes pre-emptive self-defence, according to the Caroline Doctrine. For the use of force by a government against another state or non-state actor to be considered as self-defence, the force must be proportionate, and the threat imminent and necessary and not resolvable by other means. However, these terms are not clearly defined. There has been a [tendency](#), especially by the United States and Israel, and now by Turkey, to ignore the requirement of immediacy, allowing them to carry out what they argue are ‘preventative’ actions. This tendency was given a massive boost by the American reaction to 9/11 – the War against Terror, and the Bush Doctrine, which claimed a moral right to preventative attacks even where there is no immediate threat, as in the invasion of Iraq. Article 51 is increasingly being called upon to justify acts of aggression.

The Nuremburg Tribunal deemed wars of aggression the supreme international crime. Today’s perpetrators are rebranding aggression as self-defence, as we enter an Orwellian world where ‘war is peace’.

A week ago, in the International Court of Justice, Israel’s lawyers attempted to claim their genocide of the people of Gaza as justifiable self-defence. This last week, Turkey yet again quoted Article 51 to justify the deliberate targeted destruction of the vital infrastructure essential for daily life in North and East Syria.

## Turkish attacks in North and East Syria

The Turkish military has never stopped their attacks on the region, despite the ceasefires after their 2019 invasion, brokered by Russia and the United States. But now, low level attacks have been replaced by heavy bombardment for the third time in 3 ½ months. Turkish planes and artillery have especially targeted electricity stations and the region's only gas bottling plant. In mid-winter, millions of people have been left in the cold and dark, and without gas to cook their food. No mains electricity means no pumps to bring water, severely restricted health services, no flour mills, no bread ovens. Industrial units can't operate; schools and universities can't function. Other Turkish strikes have targeted oil production, the main source of revenue, as well as a seemingly random list of homes, businesses, and warehouses. Many of the facilities targeted had just been brought back into operation with basic temporary repairs after previous Turkish attacks. Even after this extensive devastation, President Erdoğan has [promised](#) more to come in the next months, and he has been backed by a large parliamentary majority, including the mainstream "opposition". (Although Turkey has claimed that they have also killed SDF fighters, this has been categorically [denied](#) by the SDF.)

The targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure is in itself a [war crime](#), but this is also another egregious example of aggression dressed up as self-defence. The ostensible reason for the attacks given by the Turkish government – as for the similar attacks over Christmas – was a successful counterattack by PKK guerrillas against Turkish forces invading the northern Iraqi mountains where the PKK have their bases. While the PKK has repeatedly called for peace talks (and declared a unilateral ceasefire at the time of last February's earthquake, which lasted till the May elections) the Turkish government is committed to eliminating claims for Kurdish rights through the use of military oppression. They are fighting a war against the PKK, and in the winter fogs and snowstorms, the PKK guerrillas have been able to kill a large number of Turkish soldiers. Turkey admitted to nine deaths on this last occasion, while the PKK [claim](#) that the figure is much higher, and that Turkey is hiding their real losses.

Turkey has reacted to the humiliation of the loss of their soldiers and the failure of the second largest army in NATO to eradicate the guerrilla bases, by letting loose their weaponry on the people of North and East Syria. Like Israel in Gaza, they are pursuing a criminal path of collective punishment, but in the Syrian case they are not even attacking the area where the PKK are based. The Syrian Democratic forces (SDF) are not the PKK, however many times Turkey says they are the same. They have not attacked Turkey, and have made it clear they have no intention of doing so – though they have, naturally, defended their land against Turkish attacks.

Turkey will not allow any element of autonomy for a predominantly Kurdish region that follows Abdullah Öcalan's ideas on radical democracy, women's rights, and multi-ethnic coexistence, even if that region is part of another country. They have already invaded and occupied two parts of the predominantly Kurdish north of Syria, placing them under the control of brutal jihadi militias, and they have made no secret of their desire to invade again. (Human rights violations by the militias controlling Turkish-occupied Afrîn are the subject of a [criminal complaint](#) filed on Thursday by human rights organisations at the German Federal Public Prosecutors Office.) Turkey has so far refrained from another invasion because neither the United States nor Russia will move their troops out of the way, but they have found that, despite being guarantors of the 2019 ceasefires, neither of these powers will do anything to stop attacks from the air or bombardment across the border.

Much to Turkey's annoyance, the United States not only considers the SDF as separate and different from the PKK, but also regards them as vital allies in the fight against ISIS. The US-dominated International Coalition has provided the air power for the defeat of ISIS as a territorial force, but the SDF has carried out the action on the ground, and it is SDF fighters whose graves fill the cemeteries in their thousands.

The only threat that the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria poses to Turkey is that of a good example of a peaceful and democratic society, but it is precisely this that Turkey's attacks target. The destruction of vital infrastructure and the region's economy, the knowledge that every achievement can be destroyed in an instant, and the constant threat

of death from the skies are calculated to make social development impossible. The attacks are intended to force people to leave and to generate uncertainty and insecurity that makes people lose confidence in the Autonomous Administration.

Turkey's attacks are bringing about conditions that allow ISIS to recruit and regrow. And in the course of those attacks, while the SDF is focussed on defence of the region, they must also guard the many ISIS prisoners who the world has abandoned to their charge, and who are ready to exploit the situation to escape. Already, on Tuesday, there was a rocket attack and [foiled escape attempt](#) at the prison in Hasaka that saw a mass breakout two years ago.

The United States maintains 900 troops in North and East Syria and claims that their sole function is the elimination of ISIS. But they do nothing to stop their Turkish NATO "allies" from destabilising the region and targeting the lives and achievements of their SDF allies in the fight against ISIS. For Russia, any weakening of the Autonomous Administration is to be welcomed as generating pressure for the Administration to seek protection through an agreement with the Russian-backed Assad regime under terms that would deprive North and East Syria of their autonomy.

With neither NATO nor Russia wanting to draw attention to Turkey's war crimes, and the world's eyes focused on Gaza, there has been barely any acknowledgement of what is happening in the media. The reports that have been published generally quote Turkish talking points uncritically.

## **Iran's attack in Erbil**

By contrast, Iran's missile attack, late Monday night, on the home of a well-known Kurdish businessman in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, received widespread coverage – and, unlike Turkey's destruction in North and East Syria, was the subject of a condemnatory [tweet](#) from the US State Department. The attack killed Peshraw Dizayee and members of his family, and also a visiting businessman, Karam Mikhail. Iran claimed that Dizayee worked for Mossad, which has been widely denied. There are strong echoes of

Iran's March 2022 attack on another businessman's home (then empty), which they claimed was an Israeli base.

The New Arab [argues](#) that "Iran's attack was a show of military strength following Israeli and US strikes on its regional interests, but also a message to Iraqi Kurdish leaders." The attack demonstrated Iranian power and capabilities and acted as a warning to the Kurdistan Regional Government not to mess with Iranian interests. For Iranian domestic consumption, it provided a response to the suicide bombings earlier this month that killed 84 people attending a memorial commemoration for Qasem Soleimani. Those bombings were claimed by the Islamic State, who Iran portrayed as directed by Israel. For Iran, the Dizayee villa was a safe target that would not provoke retaliation. For most of these purposes, the truth of the Mossad claim is not important.

## **Turkey in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

While Erbil has been targeted by Iran, Turkey has been threatening the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Region's second largest party, which is centred on Sulaymaniyah. The PUK's peshmerga forces have been working with the SDF and the International Coalition in the fight against ISIS, and Turkey claims this as evidence of PKK links. During Turkey's parliamentary debate on their attacks against the PKK in Iraq and the SDF in Syria, foreign minister Hakan Fidan [accused](#) the PUK of opening up Sulaymaniyah to the PKK, and threatened "further action" against them.

The Turkish intelligence service is suspected of being behind the [murder](#), on Thursday, of a Kurdish woman activist from Rojava, who was killed on the street in Kirkuk by two men on a moped firing a silenced pistol. Firyal Suleiman Halid's death has been added to a growing list of assassinations of Kurdish activists in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that have been attributed to the Turkish state.

## **Iran and Pakistan against the Baluch**

Iranian forces have been busy this week, after a period when they appeared to be avoiding direct confrontation and relying instead on the actions of allied

militias. Besides the Erbil attack, they carried out a missile strike on what they said was the Pakistan-based headquarters of Jaish Ul-Adl, a militant Iranian Baluch separatist group that has been responsible for the deaths of many Iranian policemen. Two days later, Pakistan struck back at Pakistani Baluch separatists based in Iran. Although both attacks were claimed to be on militant bases, the [recorded deaths](#) are of two Baluch children in Pakistan, and three Baluch women and four children in Iran.

Baluch in both Pakistan and Iran have [experienced](#) discrimination, insurgency, and brutal counterinsurgency. Zahedan, in Iranian Baluchistan, was the site of weekly Friday protests after the death of Jina Amini. In the last few weeks these had been prevented by a massive security presence, but yesterday people were out in the cold and wet [protesting](#) against the attacks.

## **Inside Turkey**

In Turkey, the bombing of North and East Syria was accompanied by a domestic crackdown with yet more political detentions. Last Saturday, 113 people were [detained](#) in 32 cities and accused of links with the PKK, and [early morning raids](#) on Tuesday led to the detention of a further 165 Kurdish politicians and activists.

The pro-Kurdish leftist DEM Party (formerly the HDP) used the occasion of the Turkish soldiers' deaths to call for peace and to point out that the soldiers killed are always from poor families. As party co-chair Tülay Hatimoğulları [put](#) it, "pain has a class".

Local elections are due at the end of March, and despite all the detentions and the dismissal of almost all the mayors elected last time, there are still many applicants to be DEM Party candidates. The experiment of using primaries to select the candidates has been [rewarded](#) with a high turnout.

Meanwhile, a legal complaint by the DEM Party against the mass registration of voters at fictitious addresses in marginal seats in Diyarbakir was [rejected](#) by the District Election Board.

The intolerance and violence of Turkish politics was on clear display this week. Devlet Bahçeli, the chair of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the main coalition partner of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), [claimed](#) that the presence of DEM Party members in Parliament was a "shame for democracy".

Meral Akşener, who left the MHP in 2017 to form her own İYİ Party, was Interior Minister in 1996-7 when many Kurds and leftists were killed by the deep state. On Thursday, she [told](#) an election rally "We have been witnesses to political assassinations in our past, but they were honourable ones. That's why none of us was scared then." This approval of political murders as "honourable" received wide coverage. Eren Keskin, co-chair of the Human Rights Association, observed, "We know who she means by 'honourable murder', don't we?... She is talking about our dead". Shocking though this is, it is hardly a surprise. In 2016 Akşener [told](#) a rally, "I'm sorry to say there are some on social media who say 'Meral Akşener can't be MHP leader, she's responsible for unsolved murders.' Let them say what they will; I'm fine with all of it. If something is necessary for this country, for this nation's unity and togetherness, I will take responsibility for it right to the end."

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the abduction and imprisonment of Abdullah Öcalan, his lawyers have produced their [annual report](#). But they have to state that "2023 has been another year of absolute incommunicado detention, in which we have not been able to receive a single sign of life from our clients."

## **Political reaction in Europe**

The difficulty in getting international politicians to respond to all this was exemplified this week by news from Scotland that the First Minister, Humza Yousaf, had invited Erdoğan to come to Scotland when he next visits the UK. Yousaf, who has a Palestinian father-in-law, had won admiration for showing genuine humanity with respect to Gaza, and appears to have taken Erdoğan's rhetorical support for the Palestinians at face value.

More positively, this has become an opportunity to highlight how everything that Erdoğan rightly criticises Israel for, he does himself to the Kurds; and mainstream media has been happy to expose Yousaf's double standards. Even before Scottish civil society organisations had [issued](#) a detailed letter of condemnation, Yousaf had come under [strong criticism](#) on the BBC. His initial response was revealing: "Why on earth would Scotland not look to seek to engage with a Nato ally and of course with somebody we would seek to do business and trade with?" This classic example of realpolitik was described by the Scottish organisations as "hypocritical" coming from the leader of a party that "positions itself as distinct from Westminster and with a more discerning eye towards human rights abuses and regional autonomy."

Politicians don't all have a blind spot when it comes to the Kurds. This week, the convenors of the Kurdish Friendship Group in the European Parliament [wrote](#) to the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, calling on him to use the power of his office to put pressure on the Turkish government to stop their attacks on North and East Syria. For now, though, political leaders are generally too concerned about upsetting Turkey to make a stand for the Kurds. We still have a lot of campaigning to do to make it difficult for them to ignore our voices.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#)