

# Turkey and ISIS in deadly partnership – a weekly news review

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## Sarah Glynn

As I sat down on Thursday night to write a piece focused on the impacts of Turkey's constitutional racism, news came in of a mass breakout by ISIS prisoners in Hasaka, in North and East Syria. This has to be the headline story, but this, too, is ultimately a consequence of Turkish racism, which would rather see northern Syria dominated by brutal 'jihadi' gangs, including ISIS, than allow the majority-Kurdish population to demonstrate the possibility of democratic autonomy and multicultural coexistence.

ISIS cells attacked the prison from outside after setting off a car bomb by the gate, while the prisoners rioted within. Over 100 prisoners are believed to have escaped. The attackers infiltrated the surrounding civilian areas, where the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local security forces attempted to contain them with minimum casualties. A group hiding in the economics faculty building were bombed by coalition planes. By yesterday evening, the SDF's Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, could tweet that all fugitives had been arrested. However, there are still pockets of militants holed up in nearby streets, with some using residents as human shields, and there is still unrest within the prison. Last night, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported 67 casualties: 39 ISIS members, five civilians and 23 members of security forces, but noted that the numbers were likely to rise.

Turkey has been shown to have supported ISIS in the past. They continue to provide them succour, both directly, with safe havens in the occupied areas and indirectly through fomenting the instability on which they thrive. On Friday afternoon, as the SDF fought to contain the attack, Turkish drones hit a convoy from the Til Temir military council that was on its way to provide support.

The US coalition provided air support for containing the attack, but international powers have done little to stop Turkey from generating the conditions that allow such attacks to happen.

Abdulkarim Omar, Co-Chair of the Foreign Relations Department of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, has commented, "There needs to be stability in the region for terrorism to end...The region is under siege and embargo. All of these things make it possible for ISIS terrorism to persist... The Turkish state's never-ending attacks and the region's economic distress serve to resurrect ISIS." And he has emphasised the need for the international community to take their share of responsibility for the ISIS prisoners.

This Wednesday was a day of coming together for commemoration and making promises of future resistance. It was the fifteenth anniversary of the murder of Armenian journalist and editor, Hrant Dink, who was shot on the

street outside his newspaper; and it was the fourth anniversary of Turkey's announcement of the beginning of the offensive that ended, 58 days later, in their occupation of Afrîn.

Dink is remembered for raising Armenian consciousness and building hopes of better relations between ethnic Turks and the nation's minorities. He campaigned fearlessly for democracy and for inter-ethnic fraternity, and he refused to give up on the possibility of being an Armenian citizen of Turkey.

Despite the murder case reaching a final verdict last year, with 26 convictions, including former police chiefs, the full extent of the forces behind Dink's killing has never been adequately investigated and exposed. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have called for a Parliamentary Enquiry.

Speaking to the Armenian Institute in London on Wednesday night, Armenian HDP MP, Garo Palan, described how Dink gave his community the courage to stop trying to find an elusive safety by staying silent in the face of insults and instead make a stand against racism. Dink's funeral was attended by over 100,000 people from different backgrounds, who chanted together, 'we are all Armenians'; and fifteen years on, his political legacy is being remembered across the world.

Afrîn had been a predominantly Kurdish canton of autonomous northern Syria and a model of inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony. Under Turkish control, most of the established population has left and been replaced by the families of Islamist mercenaries – an act of ethnic cleansing that, whatever happens next, will leave a legacy of tension and conflict. Those who remain face a nightmare of extreme violence and pillage at the hands of Turkey's mercenary gangs and the Turkification of every aspect of public life.

This anniversary has been marked by defiant rallies across North and East Syria, especially in Shehba, where most of the displaced families from Afrîn now live in camps or other forms of temporary accommodation. The demonstrators called for the end of the Turkish occupation and for the 'international community' to stop ignoring the crimes being committed by the Turkish state. Their message is summed up in a Tweet from Mazloun Abdi:

“On the fourth anniversary of the Turkish aggression against Afrîn, whose people were subjected to the harshest and most horrific violations by Turkey and its mercenaries, as well as to forced displacement, without clear action from international actors, the restoration of Afrîn, the safe return of its residents, and the cessation of all crimes are our top priorities.”

Both events being remembered are consequences of the ethnic nationalism that is a foundational principle of the Turkish Republic. The Armenian Genocide predated the Republic, of course, but the attitudes that made it happen were embraced by Kemal Atatürk and have been shared by a century of Turkish governments. Nationalism is used as a rallying cry to strengthen government support, while minorities become scapegoats to be blamed for all difficulties.

The Turkish state only formally recognises the existence of religious minorities – though this recognition affords little protection to these groups and enables targeted discriminatory laws. Other minority groups, of which the Kurds are much the biggest, are accepted only so long as they abandon their cultural identity and conform to forced Turkification. Any attempt to promote non-Turkish cultural rights or protest discrimination is liable to prosecution as “inciting enmity or hatred among the population” or “denigration of Turkishness”, and, increasingly, as terrorism.

While Dink described himself as on the left, Osman Kavala is part of a more liberal tradition, but he, too, has come under attack as a promoter of multicultural democracy. He has been held in prison since October 2017, accused of being a prime instigator of the mass protest movement that began with demonstrations against the destruction for development of Istanbul’s Gezi Park in 2013, which is being misportrayed by President Erdoğan as an attempted insurrection supported by George Soros.

In December 2019, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Kavala’s detention violated his human rights and that he should be released immediately. Instead of complying, as membership of the Council of Europe obliges them to do, Turkey attempted to evade the ruling by releasing Kavala and straight away rearresting him on similar charges – but the court was not

convinced by this. The body charged with implementing the European Court's decisions is the Committee of Ministers. The Committee has put off instigating infringement proceedings for as long as possible. Still, at the beginning of December, they began the long process that could eventually lead to restrictions being placed on Turkey within the Council of Europe, or even (theoretically) their exclusion. This process has only once been initiated before. The Committee's next deadline for Turkey to respond to their demands is 2 February. On Tuesday, the Istanbul 13th High Criminal Court ruled that Kavala must remain in prison.

State racism and discrimination is facilitated by eliminating free speech. The Journalists Association of Turkey observed in their statement on the anniversary of Dink's murder, "we live in a country where the instigators and hired guns of 66 journalists' murders cannot be revealed... In an environment where the trial, detention and imprisonment of journalists over their thoughts and writings have become ordinary..."

Two cases this week well illustrate the political nature of Turkey's judicial system. Nedim Türfent, a news editor and journalist, is serving an 8 year 9 months' sentence under terrorism legislation. He was detained in May 2016 after reporting on the ill-treatment of Kurdish workers by Turkish Special Police Forces. The case against him was supported by 20 hidden witnesses; however, all but one retracted their statements, claiming they had been made under torture. He is appealing to the European Court of Human Rights but has now been told that all meetings with his lawyer must be held in the presence of an official and recorded for the next three months. The authorities claim that this illegal rule is necessary for security, following a request from a New York University to let them translate Türfent's writing.

A new indictment has been taken out in the ongoing trial against Abdurrahman Gök. The journalist is being charged under terrorism legislation for his photograph of student Kemal Kurkut at the 2017 Newroz celebrations in Diyarbakır, which captured the moment that the police raised their guns to shoot him dead. The new charges concern Gök's sharing of pictures of the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) in Syria.

The pro-Kurdish HDP, which persistently campaigns for minority rights, already has thousands of members behind bars and faces ongoing court cases that would see leading members imprisoned for life and the party closed down. This week, two more HDP MPs moved closer to having their immunities lifted to allow them to be sent to prison.

A request for withdrawal of immunity was filed against Diyarbakir MP, Remziye Tosin, for asking musicians at a wedding to play a Kurdish song. The song has been deemed terrorist propaganda. Before becoming an MP, she had been imprisoned for fifteen months after the Turkish army siege of Sur and had seen three of her children temporarily placed in a children's home.

Moves to lift the immunity of another Diyarbakir MP, Semra Güzel, began the week before, based on photographs from 2014 that were leaked to the press on 8 January. These show her with her fiancée, Volkan Bora, a PKK fighter who was killed in 2017. They were taken at his camp in Iraqi Kurdistan and were found on his mobile phone. Güzel explains that they had got engaged as students but, "While Volkan Bora was working as a journalist, he had to go abroad as a result of the investigations and lawsuits he was exposed to in late 2009. Although I tried to reach him, we could not meet him in any way until 2014. Like many people who tried to see their children, mothers, fathers and loved ones in the positive atmosphere of the solution and peace process initiated between 2013-2015, I tried to reach Volkan Bora... I was working in the public sector in 2014 and I was not a member of any political party." HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, has emphasised that "While the [peace] process was going on, with the encouragement of the AKP government, tens of thousands of people had the opportunity to see their PKK member children, relatives and loved ones. The government itself prepared the way... It is clear hypocrisy to use photographs of such a period as an operation material against the HDP". This week, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which has spoken out against the attempts to close the party, announced that they will also support the removal of Güzel's immunity; and the photographs have been added to the HDP closure case file.

Today will see a mass demonstration in support of the HDP in Diyarbakir.

The politicisation of Turkey's judiciary continued this week with the appointment to the Constitutional Court of a former politician from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The country's highest court now has ten out of fifteen members who are sympathisers with the government.

Under Erdoğan and the AKP, discrimination has acquired a religious dimension to add to the shrill intolerance generated by authoritarianism. This week's high-profile target is pop diva Sezen Aksu, whose reference to the ignorance/naivety of Adam and Eve in a 2017 song has recently become the focus of a hate campaign and a legal complaint. Now Erdoğan has added his own venom, with a message that could have come from the ISIS playbook. Commenting that no-one should speak ill of Adam and "Mother Eve", he stated, "It is our duty to rip out these tongues if necessary."

Institutional and societal racism is also behind the CHP's dangerous attempts to garner support by playing the anti-refugee card. Party leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has repeated his pledge that under a CHP government, Syrian refugees living in Turkey would be sent back to Syria within two years. Such comments can only fuel further anti-refugee violence. Of course, Kılıçdaroğlu is far from alone in his rejection of refugees, and, just this week, North Press Agency reported on Syrian refugees in Denmark who are trying to move to other European countries to avoid being sent back to Damascus.

Communities that are victims of racism can also include perpetrators of racism against others, especially if they are perceived to be in competition for scarce resources. The HDP has taken a firm stand in support of refugee rights, but Bianet has a sad report about the discrimination faced by Syrian Kurds in Turkey's Kurdish capital of Diyarbakir.

The most potent reminder of how a victimised group can produce victimisers is provided by Zionism and its treatment of the Palestinians. Despite the many parallels between the Turkish Government's treatment of the Kurds and the Israeli Government's treatment of the Palestinians, Erdoğan has wooed the Muslim vote through public criticism of the Zionist state. But, alongside public gestures, such as recalling the Turkish Ambassador when the US Embassy

moved to Jerusalem, the two countries have always maintained strong trade links. More recently, Erdoğan has been attempting to strengthen diplomatic links as part of a broader effort to build international alliances. This week there have been reports of plans for an Israeli presidential visit to Turkey.

In other diplomatic manoeuvres, Erdoğan is putting himself forward as a mediator between Russia and Ukraine on the grounds that he has made weapons deals with both sides. Turkey, under Erdoğan, has bought S-400 air defence missiles from Russia and sold Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine. This background does not prevent him from presenting himself as a man of peace, declaring, “We need to erase war from the history of politics”.

Turkey’s war-mongering in North and East Syria is the subject of a sobering report by Fehim Tastekin in Al-Monitor. Tastekin writes that “Turkey appears to be aiming to maintain high tensions in northeast Syria”. He quotes a journalist based in the region, Nazim Dastan, who comments, “Turkey has never ceded its plans to seize Kobani. They are looking for an opportunity for this... The attacks were, as if, aiming to gauge the pulse in Kobani or potential reactions from the United States and Russia.”

Tastekin describes how Turkey uses its military attacks to support its political manoeuvres. They want to prevent the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria from being able to negotiate a constitutional settlement with Damascus by destroying the Administration’s bargaining power – a situation that President Assad had his Russian backers are happy to go along with. Tastekin also observes that Turkey has been responding to growing discontent among its mercenaries, which is not helped by the real fall in their Turkish Lira salaries.

This is the backdrop to the ISIS attack with which I began. The pressure on the Autonomous Administration and the SDF is never-ending and from all directions. It has been made worse by the closing of the border gate to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which has left the beleaguered region inaccessible other than via Damascus. The US have now negotiated a twice-monthly passage of vital aid, but, as close



supporters of the Kurdistan Regional Government, they must be able to put weight on them to do more.

Meanwhile, in another border region of Iraq, the Iraqi army have been putting yet further pressure on the Yazidis' autonomous security services to hand over control of Şengal (Sinjar) to themselves and the KDP, in line with an agreement made, without consulting the Yazidis, in October 2020.

This agreement, and the KDP's hostility towards the Autonomous Administration, are both products of Turkish influence and Turkey's determination to crush genuine Kurdish autonomy. Yesterday afternoon, at the same time as the drone attack on reinforcements coming to Hasaka, another Turkish drone attacked Şengal, killing two Yazidi fighters and wounding two more.

Of course, none of this is happening without solid resistance, but that resistance needs to be international. Perhaps this ISIS attack can help focus minds on the danger Turkey's racist aggression is bringing to the whole region and beyond, but this won't occur without much wider dissemination of what is happening and why it is happening.