

The road to Lausanne and the division of Kurdistan – a weekly news review

24 July will be the centenary of the Treaty of Lausanne, which served as midwife to the Republic of Turkey and left the Kurdish population of the old Ottoman Empire divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. This treaty underpins all subsequent Kurdish history, and this week's news review concentrates on how it came about. Like today, we see competing imperial ambitions, external meddling, secret agreements, broken promises, incitement of inter-ethnic violence, and population displacement - all in the service of powerful elites. Similar forces are intervening in the future of the Rojava Revolution – 11 years old on Wednesday – and also in the future of our climate.

[1:22 pm 22/07/2023](#)

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24 July will be the centenary of the Treaty of Lausanne, which served as midwife to the Republic of Turkey and left the Kurdish population of the old Ottoman Empire divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. In each of these states, and also in Iran, which was already separate, Kurds have suffered suppression of their culture, and attacks on their very existence. The treaty famously left the Kurds as the biggest nation without their own state, and it underpins all subsequent Kurdish history. Today, Kurds are marching in Lausanne to show their opposition to its rulings; and I will spend the greater part of this week's news review going back in time to see how these came

about. In fact, there is so much to say on this pivotal event that I will return to it next week to examine the aftermath and the ongoing political debates.

Although I am writing about events 100 years ago, this is a story in which the political forces seem only too familiar, demonstrating how little we have learnt from history. Like today, we see competing imperial ambitions, external meddling, secret agreements, broken promises, incitement of inter-ethnic violence, and population displacement – all in the service of powerful elites.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement

The Ottoman Empire entered the First World War on the side of the Central Powers. They made a secret alliance with Germany in August 1914, and fired their first shots at the end of October. In 1916, Britain and France, with the assent of tsarist Russia, anticipated Ottoman defeat and planned the break-up of the empire in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement, named after its British and French authors. Red and blue pencil lines divided the map between British and French zones, with some areas under full control and others under British or French protection. Earlier agreements and later additions brought Russia and Italy into the mix.

Despite this agreement with France, the British simultaneously encouraged Hussein bin Ali to lead an Arab revolt against the Ottomans, promising to recognise Arab independence.

The Sykes-Picot Agreement was made public by the Bolsheviks after the Russian Revolution, when the new Russian government promised to end all secret deals and [called for](#) an immediate peace in which no nation was incorporated by another against the free will of its people. In response to this, and to the horrors of the Armenian Genocide, 1918 saw much talk from the Allied Powers about the right of self-determination – not least from US President Woodrow Wilson, whose [Fourteen Points](#) for peace included the statement that “the Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development”. However, when it

came to the crunch, neither these fine words, nor Britain's promise to the Arabs, would withstand the demands of realpolitik.

The Armistice of Mudros

The Ottoman empire did not sue for peace until October 1918, when they negotiated an armistice with Britain (much to the annoyance of the French) twelve days before the armistice with Germany ended the war on the western front. The Armistice of Mudros imposed punitive terms on the Ottomans and included the [vaguely worded clause](#) "The Allies to have the right to occupy any strategic points in the event of any situation arising which threatens the security of the Allies." These weasel words were used to open the door to invasions by the Allied Powers, effectively nullifying Mudros as an armistice agreement.

Foreign invasion

On 13-14 November, just two weeks after the armistice was signed, Allied troops – French, British, Italian, and Greek – took over Istanbul; and this was quickly followed by further takeovers and incursions by British, French, and Greek forces. At the Paris Peace Conference of January 1919, these different powers argued for their treaty rights to parts of a dismantled Ottoman Empire. To support their competing claims, Greece and Italy backed up their arguments with warships and troops. An Italian force landed in Antalya, and, in May 1919, Greece carried out a violent and ethnically charged occupation of the city of Smyrna (modern İzmir), where half the population was ethnic Greek.

Mustafa Kemal and the National Pact

As the extent of the Ottoman government's capitulation and the implications of the "armistice" became increasingly clear, Turkish resistance grew and coalesced around Mustafa Kemal – later to be given the name Atatürk, Father of the Turks. Already a successful military commander, he co-ordinated Turkish nationalists to resist the invaders, and established an alternative centre of power in Ankara. In July and August 1919, Mustafa Kemal organised a congress in the eastern city of Erzurum that resolved to defend Turkish land against foreign intervention and division, and that drew up the first draft of the [National Pact](#) (Misak-ı Millî). The Pact declared all territories that were not

occupied by a foreign power at the time of the Armistice of Mudros, and that were inhabited by a Turkish majority, to be the homeland of the Turkish nation; and it allowed for the future of territories without a Turkish majority to be decided by referendum.

After the Chamber of Deputies (the elected lower house of the Ottoman parliament) voted to support the National Pact in January 1920, Allied troops forced its closure in March, consolidating the legitimacy of Mustafa Kemal's alternative power base, which formally declared itself the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.

Foreign invasion was now combined with civil war, with the embattled sultan decrying Kemal's nationalists as infidels. And in the summer of 1920, Britain helped Greece increase their area of occupation.

The Treaty of Sèvres

All the while, international diplomats continued the negotiations begun at the Paris Peace Conference, and in August, in the French town of Sèvres, Britain, France, and Italy, and representatives of the official Ottoman government in Istanbul signed a peace treaty. (Greece did not approve the agreed boundaries.) The Treaty of Sèvres was very much a victor's treaty. It gave the Allies control over Ottoman finances and restricted the size of the Ottoman army. It put Iraq and Palestine under a British mandate, Syria and Lebanon under a French mandate, and divided much of the remaining land into zones of influence. The Greek and Italian occupations were formalised. However, it also recognised the Arab kingdom of Hejaz (including Makkah and Medina), an independent Armenia, and a Kurdish region ([Articles 62-64](#)) that would be given local autonomy with the possibility of future independence and of being joined in that independence by the Kurds in Mosul.

While these plans for Armenia and Kurdistan were in line with ideas about self-administration, and responded to demands by the Istanbul-based Society for the Rise of Kurdistan, they also served British interests by preventing Turkish links with Turkic central Asia and by creating a cost-effective buffer between Britain's Iraq mandate and Turkey.

War

A treaty signed by a government that has lost control is valueless. Mustafa Kemal's Grand National Assembly did not recognise Sèvres, which was left dead in the water. Instead, they continued to fight and to turn the tide against the foreign invaders. In this they received material aid – weapons and gold – from the Bolsheviks, who were under attack from the same foreign imperialist forces in the Russian Civil War. Eastern Armenia became a soviet republic while western Armenia was absorbed into Turkey – as formalised in the Treaty of Kars in March 1921. That same month, France agreed their own peace with the Turks, which left the French in control of Syria, but required them to abandon their ambitions in southern Anatolia. The Turkish nationalists could now focus on reversing Greek gains.

In a final act, after retaking Smyrna in September 1922, triumphant Turkish troops set fire to the city's Greek and Armenian quarters. Tens of thousands died in the fire, tens of thousands more were deported to labour camps and probable death, and most of the rest of the Greek and Armenian population were evacuated as refugees. Although particularly brutal, this was far from the only act of ethnic terror in a war in which such atrocities were committed by all sides and hundreds of thousands of Christians were killed or forced into exile.

By October, the Allies were ready to agree an armistice with Mustafa Kemal's Grand National Assembly that stipulated full Greek withdrawal. On 1 November the Grand National Assembly voted to abolish the sultanate.

The Treaty of Lausanne

New peace negotiations began in the Swiss town of Lausanne on 11 November 1922, and the resulting treaty was signed the following July. The balance of forces was very different from the situation in Sèvres, three years earlier. Instead of an old regime that they effectively held hostage, the Allies faced an opponent that had beaten back their ambitions on the battlefield. Britain and France were still awarded mandates over (respectively) Iraq and Syria, but the Turkish government was recognised as sovereign and independent across Anatolia and into the Kurdish and formerly Armenian

lands of the east. The Turkish Straits were left under international control until new arrangements were agreed in the Convention of Montreux in 1936, and disagreement over control of Mosul was left unresolved until finally decided in favour of British Mandated Iraq by the League of Nations in 1926. The negotiations in Lausanne also produced a convention agreeing the compulsory population exchange of Orthodox Christians from Turkey and Muslims from Greece. Ten weeks after the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, Allied forces finally left Istanbul, and on 29th October Turkey officially proclaimed itself a republic.

In the Treaty of Lausanne there was no mention of Kurdistan, and the Kurds of the Ottoman empire found themselves divided between Turkey, Iraq and Syria. While this was a blow to the hopes of Kurdish nationalists, many Kurds in Turkey did not initially perceive it to be a problem. Mustafa Kemal had been effective in portraying his campaign as a joint Turkish Kurdish struggle against foreign intervention, and in appealing to all Muslims to protect the caliphate and to prevent the establishment of any centres of Christian power. Many Kurds supported him and only realised the real implications of his Turkish nationalism and its negation of anything Kurdish when it was too late.

Among those who had argued, or even fought, for Kurdish independence, there was neither the consensus nor the coordination that could force their voice to be heard on an international stage. Some wanted autonomy, others a Kurdish nation state, while tribal leaders exploited the situation for personal gain.

Because nation states form the framework of modern society, lack of state formation is often regarded as a sign of backwardness, however, the problems that have faced the Kurds in the century since Lausanne are not the result of the lack of a Kurdish nation state per se, but of finding themselves part of other nation states with their own aggressive nationalisms. They are a result of the state system itself.

Kurds in Turkey

Modern Turkish nationalism, which defines itself against the Kurdish “other”, came to power with Atatürk and has persisted for 100 years. Its vindictive

cruelty is exemplified by the fate of Mehmet Emin Özkan who was [released](#) from prison this week after being incarcerated for over 27 years for a crime he did not commit. Özkan was convicted in 1996 for the murder of a Brigadier General in 1993 in the Kurdish town of Licê. The case hinged on the accounts of two witnesses who subsequently confessed that their statements had been made under torture, but the promised retrial never happened. Özkan, now 84, has only been let out of prison because of the severity of his multiple health problems, which have long left him unable to look after himself. He has been let out to die – and if he survives three months, he could even be sent back.

After the general's murder, thousands of Turkish soldiers went on a revenge rampage through the town, killing at least fourteen civilians, wounding others, and setting fire to homes and businesses. Despite the scale of this massacre, the Turkish judicial system has failed to hold to account those responsible. Only two people were ever accused. Their case was [dragged out](#) over many years and finally closed after both defendants had died.

Despite the huge injustice, Özkan [remains](#) defiant. He told Mezopotamya Agency "We will resist until the end. Prison is heavy. Our friends put up a great resistance there. No matter how much I say, it is not enough to describe this resistance... No matter what the Turkish state did, they could not stop this resistance."

11 years of Syrian revolution

This past week has also seen a much newer anniversary. 100 years ago, the Kurds of Rojava found themselves a minority in a majority Arab region that would go on to make them second class citizens, or, in many cases, exclude them from citizenship rights altogether. Eleven years ago, on 19 July 2012, the city of Kobanê began the revolution that has created the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Although started by Kurds, the revolution has used the ideas of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, to generate a form of self-rule that is careful to include all the region's ethnicities and religions. Their simple wish to create a better form of society has seen them assaulted from all sides by forces that do not want them to succeed.

Today's Syria is subject to similar foreign meddling and exploitation of ethnic and religious difference to that experienced 100 years ago, and, like then, the Kurds are allowed no voice in international discussions about Syria's future. The Autonomous Administration has been given no formal recognition, and supporters marked the anniversary by demanding ["#Status4NorthAndEastSyria"](#).

Russia has protected their own influence in the region by enabling the survival of President Assad. They also have ties with Iran, and are pushing for an agreement between Syria and Turkey

The United States has partnered with the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), but they have made it very clear that their joint actions only concern the fight against ISIS.

US and EU sanctions have had a devastating impact on Syrian infrastructure and quality of life. Although sanctions have been lifted for North and East Syria, the region is still part of the wider Syrian economy, and the value of the Syrian Pound has plummeted. This week it [reached](#) a new low.

Tuesday's meeting of the SDF's Military Councils [discussed](#) the ongoing attacks by Turkey, attempts by parties affiliated to Assad's Syrian Government to destabilise the autonomous region, new terrorist tactics being used by ISIS, and the risk posed by "normalisation" between Syria and Turkey.

Foreign Relations Co-chair, Ciya Kurd, [explains](#) that, although the autonomous administration (through Russian mediation) has coordinated with the Syrian Army since Turkey's 2019 invasion, they have failed in their attempts to have a political dialogue, and so to negotiate a peaceful solution for the country.

A series of reports by North Press lay out how Iran has used its wealth and its ties with the Syrian Regime to dominate the Deir ez-Zor region, adjacent to autonomous North and East Syria. How they have [created](#) tribal militias loyal to Iran. How they have invested in social infrastructure – [including](#) schools and hospitals, vocational training [programmes](#), and scout organisations – to

develop a population orientated towards Iran and towards Shiism. And how they have made mutually beneficial [deals](#) with local businessmen.

Iran

Meanwhile, in Iran itself, as Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights has [tweeted](#), “The number of citizens who have been arrested since the beginning of 2023 for political, civil & religious activities in entire Iran—with their full identities verified—has reached 1000.” Over half of these are Kurds and over a quarter Baluch.

And the Iranian Regime has [announced](#) a new campaign to enforce compulsory hijab rules on Iran’s streets.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Iraq as a whole has continued to provide devastating evidence of the destructive impact of external intervention, but the Kurdistan Region of Iraq serves as a sad reminder that local autonomy itself is not enough, and can also be undemocratic. A new [report](#) by Human Rights Watch observes that, last year, the Kurdistan Regional Government “continued to threaten basic human rights and targeted civil society actors”.

As if to prove the report correct, the region’s best known political prisoner, the journalist Sherwan Sherwani, had a further four years [added](#) to his sentence on Thursday; and, when another journalist criticised this decision, he, too, was [detained](#) by security forces.

Sherwani was critical of Turkey’s attacks on the region. This week, those attacks, which are [supported](#) by the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party, were especially heavy.

Climate crisis

This has also been a week of record-breaking world temperatures. In much of North and East Syria, the extreme heat has been made much harder to bear by deliberately engineered water shortages. Turkey has reduced the flow of water in the rivers, and Turkey’s proxy forces have shut down the captured Alok

pumping station. Last Saturday, North Press [reported](#) that the water level at North and East Syria's Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates was dropping 2cm a day, and was now so low that of the eight turbine generators they are only able to run two, and these at less than half capacity. Shortage of water affects every aspect of life, and can cause long-term soil damage.

That Rojava should be undergoing extra suffering from climate change only underlines the blind cruelty of the forces of international capitalism. Here is a society that is trying to put into practice a way of living that is genuinely sustainable and in tune with nature. It offers a way out from capitalism's current road to destruction. The powers that be were happy to ignore the Kurds a hundred years ago. They cannot afford to ignore what Kurds and their neighbours have achieved, despite the odds, in Syria today.

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