


Guttering, choking, drowning – a weekly news review

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SARAH GLYNN
Medya News

Sarah Glynn

“In all my dreams before my helpless sight, He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.” These words, describing the death of a soldier in a chemical attack, were written by the British poet, Wilfred Owen, during the First World War. The horror of the chemical attacks in that war inspired the international ban on the use of chemical weapons, which was agreed in 1925.

This week, a century later, a video has been circling the internet of a young Kurdish man ‘guttering, choking, drowning’ after an attack by Turkey on PKK fighters in the mountains of northern Iraq. Another clip shows a young woman

who has become hysterical and is suffering from memory loss and involuntary movements. The images of the young dying fighters are preceded by what we are informed are Turkish soldiers. We see them firing something into the ground – presumably into a PKK war tunnel – and running away as smoke emerges.

After seeing these disturbing images, Şebnem Korur-Fincancı, head of the Turkish Medical Association, told Medya Haber, “Obviously, toxic gasses that directly [affect] the nervous system have been used... Even though these gasses are banned, we, unfortunately, see that these are used in conflict.” She is now under investigation for “propagandising for a terrorist organisation” and “publicly degrading the Turkish Nation, the state of the Republic of Turkey and its institutions.” She has since clarified “I stated that these involuntary movements could occur with the effect of a chemical getting hold of the nervous system and that an effective investigation should be carried out in relation to this if there were allegations that a chemical had been used. I stated that if there was death, it was necessary to make a medical investigation according to the Minnesota Protocol and that it is compulsory that the investigation should be carried out by independent institutions since this is considered as a war crime in the scope of the Geneva Convention... Opening an investigation to the one who is saying ‘an investigation should be made’ gives the impression of concealing a crime... I do not think that this investigation is targeting me. This investigation is meant to be an intimidation for the whole society.”

The video is the latest evidence in support of repeated allegations of Turkish use of prohibited chemical warfare in their campaign against the PKK. To avoid the Turkish army, and evade Turkish drones, PKK guerrillas operate from tunnels dug into the mountains. Although Turkey has been attacking northern Iraq with hugely superior fire power, these tactics have allowed the PKK to deny them the victory that they crave. In angry desperation, Turkey appears to be relying on banned chemical weapons. On Tuesday, the PKK released a list of 17 people who they claim were killed in recent Turkish chemical attacks.

While Turkey has focused on the PKK guerrillas, the Turkish military has also been accused of deliberately driving local villagers away from the border areas, and some of these villagers have also reported that they have suffered from Turkish chemical attacks. This is a region where older people are alert to the nature of chemical warfare from the time of Saddam Hussein.

A dossier put together by Morning Star journalist, Steve Sweeney, for London-based, Peace in Kurdistan, included testimonies from some of these civilian victims, and also from a doctor who claimed to have treated about twenty people with symptoms of chemical attack. They told him about breathing difficulties, burns, persistent coughing, and chronic illness. They also described how the authorities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq were trying to suppress what was happening, and the doctor claimed that the original medical report written by local doctors had been confiscated and the doctors made to change it.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, is very close to Turkey. In April, the Kurdistan Regional Government claimed to have intercepted and confiscated a delivery of military supplies to the PKK that included 1200 gas masks.

When, in September, two experts from International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW) attempted to go to the area and meet people who reported being affected by chemical attack, the local KDP governor forbade them to travel there. They were not permitted to gather this vital evidence, however the IPPNW drew attention to PKK records of empty containers that could have been used for making chlorine, and to a video of what appears to be an improvised gas pumping device. And they pointed out that in February 2021, the Turkish Defence Minister told the Turkish Parliament that tear gas had been used at the entrance to a PKK tunnel in Mount Gara. Tear gas is permitted for riot control but not in a military situation.

The ban on chemical weapons is meant to be monitored by the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), based in the Hague, who can send a team of experts to investigate what is happening; but the OPCW

will only act if asked to do so by a state, and, so far, no state has come forward to make such a request on behalf of the Kurds. The OPCW stressed this rule when again called to intervene this week. To ram the point home, the OPCW even put out a perky little tweet: “#DidYouKnow: An investigation of alleged use of #ChemicalWeapons can only be triggered at the request of an #OPCW Member State.” A United Nations investigation would also need to be instigated by a state.

Without the authority of the OPCW or UN, it is next to impossible to compile the irrefutable evidence needed to force governments to act, and it would seem that international powers are quite happy for the situation to remain that way. Yet again, no one wants to make an enemy of Turkey.

There have been protests in many countries to try and force the international powers to do something, including a march of over five thousand people in Marseille, where people left school and work to take to the streets, and a protest outside the European Parliament in Brussels. The Belgian police met this protest against Turkish chemical weapons with a Turkish-speaking policeman and tear gas – before eventually allowing a dossier to be handed into the parliament.

Iran

While Turkey appears to be resorting to chemicals, the Iranian government has been letting loose even more violence against its citizens. Last Saturday night, the Tehran sky was lit up by flames emanating from the notorious Evin Prison, which was constructed by the shah in 1972 and has subjected thousands of political prisoners to a regime of rights abuse. Terrified relatives rushed to the area as explosions and gunshots were heard from within the prison walls. A report from Amnesty International, compiled after prisoners had been able to call their families, suggests that the fire broke out an hour and a half after the attacks on the prisoners started and that “the authorities sought to justify their bloody crackdown on prisoners under the guise of battling the fire and preventing prisoner escapes”. Amnesty describes extensive use of tear gas and metal pellets, and possibly also live ammunition, followed by beatings. The Iranian authorities have admitted to eight deaths

and 61 people injured, but prisoners fear that the numbers may be far higher, and there are reports that injured prisoners are not receiving medical care. State affiliated media claimed that explosions heard resulted from escaping prisoners stepping on land mines. This claim was subsequently denied, but there was no attempt to deny the existence of the internationally banned mines. There have also been reports that well-connected prisoners had been removed from the building prior to the fire, supporting the claim that the attack was pre-planned. Iran News Wire noted that “the brother of regime-elite Mehdi Rafsanjani” who is serving a sentence for financial crimes was told not to return to the prison on Friday, while Iran International, quoting three anonymous witnesses, claimed that the authorities “furloughed several important and well-connected prisoners beforehand”.

On Iran’s streets, state forces continue to attack protestors. The crackdown has been particularly brutal in the Kurdish regions, where resistance has been most comprehensive, and the state has tried to portray the uprising as a Kurdish separatist plot. Hengaw, which reports on human rights violations in Iranian Kurdistan, has shared an image of a girl from the Kurdish city of Saqqez (Jina Amina’s home town) whose body is pockmarked by 550 shotgun pellets, and a video, also from Saqqez, of state forces firing automatic weapons at people’s homes. They report that in several Kurdish cities the authorities are demanding a cash deposit for the interim release of detainees, commenting “This is the Islamic Republic of Iran’s administration extorting money to pay for the costs of repression.” They tweeted last Sunday that they believed regime forces “often, willfully, and egregiously abuse the rights of children”, and that they had “received reports of possible instances of child abducting, intentional assaults on students, murder, and most recently, the rape of a minor by IRI forces.” Kolbars – the Kurdish men who are forced through lack of any other opportunities to smuggle heavy loads across Iran’s mountainous border – have suffered even more attacks than usual. Nine Kolbars have been killed by regime forces during this month of unrest. Komala – one of the exiled Kurdish parties – has reported that four of their members have been forced, after three months of detention and torture, to make false televised confessions that they are Israeli spies.

The Jerusalem Post reports that in cracking down on protestors the Iranian security forces have been helped by men from Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, which have strong political and financial links to Iran.

Despite all this, Iran News Update reports that, after five weeks, "the regime has failed to quell demonstrations. Many merchants, petrochemical employees, and other strata supported protests through strikes. Furthermore, college and school students ceaselessly continue anti-regime rallies and marches in various cities. Meanwhile, citizens chant anti-regime slogans every night in Tehran and other metropolitan cities."

Iran International reported on Wednesday that "strikes by oil and petrochemical workers that started last week [have] spread to more plants, including contract workers at the South Pars natural gas fields that produce around 70 percent of the country's energy needs." ; while Iran News Update claimed that there had been a "significant wave of defections" from the regime's paramilitary Basij forces, and shared videos of people burning their membership cards and certificates.

While the European Union has agreed sanctions on Iranian officials following claims that Russia has used Iranian-made drones in Ukraine, one of the drones that Iran used to bomb the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran in Iraqi Kurdistan has been found to have an engine made by an Austrian subsidiary of Canadian company Bombardier.

Syria

Meanwhile in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces celebrated the fifth anniversary of the liberation of Raqqa city from ISIS, but ISIS remains an active and dangerous presence, thanks to the instability encouraged by Turkey, Iran and the Syrian government, and the safe havens provided by the Turkish occupied areas; and large areas captured by Turkey in 2018 are now under the control of Al Qaeda offshoot, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Rojava Information Centre explains that in Deir ez-Zor tribes and individuals close to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria have been frequently targeted and killed by ISIS militants, and ISIS raises money through extortion of local businesses.

The machinations and skirmishes between different Islamist groups in the Turkish controlled areas have been the subject of much speculation. HTS, which has taken control of Afrîn, is both the most powerful and the most disciplined of the Sunni jihadi groups operating in Syria. They have pushed out some of the Turkish mercenary groups that made up what called itself the Syrian National Army (SNA), and allied with other Turkish mercenary SNA groups, which Fehim Tastekin has described as HTS' Trojan horses. Internal security in Afrîn is now in the hands of the "Salvation Government", the administration that HTS developed in Idlib. Amberin Zaman, observes in al-Monitor, "It is unlikely that HTS could have acted without at least an amber light from Ankara, many say"; however, Turkey's overall strategy and how this aligns with moves towards rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus, remains unclear.

While HTS is widely regarded as a terrorist organisation, including by Turkey itself, this has not stopped the Turkish government from working with them. These latest moves could result in a stronger Islamist force in the region that would act in opposition to the Autonomous Administration and its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and which, after it had served Turkey's purpose in attacking the Kurds and their allies, could then, in Zaman's words, give Turkey "greater leverage in future talks with Syria". For the purposes of such talks, HTS could be exploited as a genuine threat, but also abandoned and turned into a shared enemy.

Salih Muslim, co-chair of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which dominates the politics of the Autonomous Administration, told al-Monitor "Turkey is definitely behind HTS". Muslim claimed to have information that the plan to bring opposition factions under HTS control had been under discussion between the Turkish secret service and the head of HTS for four months and that it was part of Turkey's design to capture the city of Manbij. He explained, "There are many tough fighters within the HTS, be they from al-Qaeda, the

Islamic State (IS) and the like, and we believe they are preparing them for battle and plan to get rid of the undisciplined ones so as to create a more effective force to fight against us”.

Of course, such geopolitical games can result in all sorts of unintended consequences. And other forces will not just stand idly by. The Syrian government has been attempting to strengthen its own position with intense shelling of Idlib and attacks on areas controlled by SNA factions.

Meanwhile, the factional fighting between SNA groups and HTS has resulted in 58 deaths, including 10 civilians of whom three were children. And HTS has started to issue dress rules and tell women in Afrîn not to go out alone. Life was already severely constrained, and dangerous, under the SNA groups, but people are fearful of what may happen next.

Iraq

Before looking at some recent developments in Turkey itself, I will go back briefly to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to note that in Sulaymaniyah students are once again protesting government failure to pay them their promised living costs, and lecturers have been protesting delays in payment of their salaries. Endemic corruption, coupled with disagreements with Bagdad, ensures that large parts of the population struggle to make ends meet. The poorest families are meant to be helped with free kerosene to heat their homes, but, in this oil-rich region, the majority of these will get nothing and will be unable to afford fuel on the open market.

Turkey

This week, Turkey was again in shock following a coal mine disaster. An explosion in Bartın on Friday 14 October claimed 41 lives and added to Turkey’s already appalling record of mining accidents. President Erdoğan told reporters, “We are people who believe in the plan of destiny. We should know that these will always happen.” His comment was met with horrified anger from both the public and politicians, which only increased as

evidence emerged of a 2019 report highlighting serious problems at the mine, and of workers' warnings about smelling gas for more than a week prior to the explosion. Emin Koramaz, head of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects, tweeted, "If you send workers hundreds of meters underground without taking the necessary precautions, inspections and creating safe conditions, you can't call it accident. This is outright murder."

The new, and heavily criticised, "censorship bill" has already been put into play, with investigations initiated against people who commented on the explosion on social media.

And censorship continues against the Kurdish press, as, for the second time in a month, the police stopped Turkey's only Kurdish-language newspaper, Xwebûn, being dispatched from Diyarbakır to Istanbul.

Another Erdoğan comment has also received critical headlines. Congratulating Mehmet Ali Çelebi, an MP who had been elected for the CHP and had defected to his party, Erdoğan asked how many children he had. When Çelebi answered one, and explained that his wife was "doing a doctorate, making a career", Erdoğan responded, "No! The career is having children. We have to increase the numbers... (Having) children is very important. Look, PKK has five, ten, fifteen." Opposition politicians were quick to point out that this was both sexist and racist. PKK members do not have children so "PKK" is being used to describe all Kurds. Of course, this statement was not intended for the opposition but to resonate with the conservative nationalists with whom Erdoğan cultivates populist support.

Meanwhile, Turkey's judicial system continues to do the government's bidding. Former Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) MP, Leyla Güven, has been given a further 11 ½ year sentence for speeches made between 2015 and 2019, which has been generally interpreted as revenge for her continued acts of resistance.

And Turkey has finally responded to the demand from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers that they provide an Action Plan stating how they will

ensure that Abdullah Öcalan maintains a 'right to hope', which was eliminated by his prison sentence of life without parole. The Turkish 'plan' was submitted two weeks after the deadline and stated that the seriousness of the crime made compliance impossible. The ball is now back in the Council of Europe's Court.

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