

# In the new Age of Empire – a weekly news review

Eric Hobsbawm's "Age of Empire" covers the four decades that led up to the first world war. There are frightening parallels between that period and the imperial rivalry of the world today. This politics has no time for minority peoples unless they can be used as pawns in the bigger game, and Kurds find themselves again caught up in other people's wars. Kurds are also facing a new hostility in Europe, where racism and deference to Turkey distort asylum decisions.

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The world feels an even less safe place this week. The sight of personal electronic equipment turned into personal bombs is deeply unsettling as well as gruesome, and shows yet another instance of the tearing up of rules that were created to prevent the repeat of former atrocities – [in this case](#) rules against the use of booby traps, as well as rules about avoiding targeting or hitting civilians. Every time rules are breached, rule

breaking becomes more normalised, and politicians and commentators find it easier to think the unthinkable.

World leaders have also brought us closer to widening war in both the Middle East and Ukraine. The United States and friends continue to arm Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, and Israel is following its booby-trap explosions with intensified bomb attacks on Lebanon. With respect to Ukraine, there is [growing pressure to allow NATO weapons to be used for attacks inside Russia](#), despite Russian warnings that this would lead to a qualitatively different response and the possibility of global nuclear war. On Thursday, a large majority vote in the European Parliament called for EU countries to lift restrictions on the use of weapons they have supplied so that Ukraine can strike Russia; and the chair of the Russian Duma responded with the chilling reminder that it would take Russia's intercontinental ballistic missiles just three minutes and twenty seconds to strike Strasbourg, where the European Parliament meets and where I am writing this article. The ease with which people on both sides discuss the merits of the most destructive scenarios is truly frightening. Humanity seems to have learnt nothing since the imperial rivalries that led to the First World War except how to make ever more devastating weapons.

Imperial rivalries allow no time for minority peoples unless they can be used as pawns in the bigger game. Geography, which has proved especially favourable to Turkey's imperial ambitions, has dealt a poor hand to the Kurds, who find themselves again caught up in other people's wars.

### **Turkey and the West**

Western double standards – which have been increasingly commented upon in attitudes towards Israel and towards Russia – also come into action with respect to Turkey, which continues to play Russia and NATO off against each other and to hold Europe hostage through their agreement to keep refugees from entering the EU. Turkey's repeated rule-breaking is tactically ignored, and has become routine. Turkey is free to carry out unprovoked attacks and to target civilians – and European countries even extradite Turkey's dissidents for them.

### **Tensions and alliances**

These widening wars have brought new tensions and new alliances between the many powers who lay claim to parts of Kurdistan. Russia has backed Syria since Soviet times, and the Syrian Government also has the support of Iran. Last week I looked at the recent agreements between Iraq and Turkey, and between Iraq and Iran. This week, Vladimir Putin approved the signing of a [Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement](#) between Russia and Iran. Amwaj Media observes that "Relations between Moscow and Tehran have deepened considerably since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in Feb. 2022," and that "Cooperation between the two countries has become particularly pronounced in the military domain." Tensions still exist, notably over the Zangazur corridor where Russia supports Azerbaijan's aim to create a link to their Nakhchivan exclave and on to Turkey, but Iran does not want to be separated from Armenia.

## America

The United States maintains influence in the region with troops in Iraq and in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, as well major air bases in NATO-ally Turkey. Although they work closely with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in North and East Syria in combating ISIS, they are there to serve the interests of the US Government, and if that means leaving the Kurds to be attacked by competing regional powers, they will not hesitate to do so. America's main regional focus is on containing Iran. Israel's expanding war has given this renewed importance, as well as turning US bases into targets for Iran's allies.

America does nothing to stop Turkish air attacks on North and East Syria; nor will they provide the SDF with air defence weapons. Despite US claims to defend democracy, they have again [opposed the Autonomous Administration's plans for elections](#). This is in deference, although they will not say so, to Turkey, who doesn't want the Administration to be given any legitimacy. The presence of US troops does, however, prevent Turkey from carrying out a further ground invasion; but US troops are not wanted by the other powers active in the region and thus attract antagonism towards the SDF and the Autonomous Administration.

Pro-Iranian parties dominate the Iraqi parliament and put pressure on the government to stop hosting US troops. Troop numbers have been considerably reduced, and a joint committee from Iraq and the US-led International Coalition was set up in August 2023 to plan the complete withdrawal of international forces. This week, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, [told Bloomberg](#) that the end of the international coalition's mission would soon be announced because the justification for it – the fight against ISIS – had gone. A small number of US troops would remain in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and these could continue to coordinate US troops in Syria, but it is unclear how long this would be sustainable.

## ISIS

Al-Sudani's depiction of ISIS defeat seems distinctly optimistic. ISIS thrives in chaos and instability, and most reports suggest that the organisation is actually undergoing a resurgence, continuing to be active in both Iraq and Syria and to plot attacks in Europe. An [undercover report by Hale Gönültaş for Artı Gerçek](#) has exposed a well-oiled operation for smuggling captured ISIS women out of camps such as al Hol to prospective husbands who may pay tens of thousands of Euros.

## Turkey and Iran in Iraq

Both Turkey and Iran have ambitions for greater control in Iraq, and both have been trying to get Iraq's help for pursuing Kurds on Iraqi soil. This week, Turkey again hit [Makhmour refugee camp](#), despite the presence of United Nations representatives in the camp; they [bombarded](#) the Bradost countryside, damaging the local agriculture, and the [Asos mountains](#), damaging vineyards and gardens. And [fighting continues](#) between the invading Turkish army and PKK guerrillas in Zap.

[Questions are still being asked](#) in the Iraqi parliament about Iraq's agreement with Turkey, which appears to allow Turkish military operations on Iraqi soil and not to stipulate Turkish withdrawal.

Iran has insisted, with threats of further attacks, that the Iranian Kurdish opposition groups that have long been based in Iraq, be disarmed and moved from their camps in the border areas. Some members of Komala refused to disarm and attempted instead to move back across the mountainous border into Iran; but they were [spotted and attacked](#) by forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In the ensuing fight a leading Komala commander and three other peshmerga fighters were reported killed.

### **Turkish-occupied Syria**

In Syria, there have been tensions in the Turkish-occupied areas, which are controlled by the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA) made up of various Islamist gangs that act as Turkey's mercenaries. Turkey originally supported these groups because they were opposed to Syrian President Assad, who President Erdoğan then wanted to depose. Now Erdoğan is attempting to reconcile with Assad and do a deal with him, and is [trying to dissolve those mercenary factions that are resistant to this reconciliation](#).

Predictably, the factions are resisting, not just because of the loss of power, but also the loss of money-making opportunities, as each faction functions as a criminal gang. Hayat Tahrir al Sham, which evolved from Iraq's al-Qaeda, may use this opportunity to intervene and try to take some of the SNA's power for themselves.

In one Afrîn village, extortion by the local mercenary gang became so bad that after a tax was put on their olive trees the villagers [decided to protest](#). Protesting women were beaten and met with live fire. Several were injured and there are also reports of deaths. Finding out what happened is difficult as the village was put under curfew and internet connections were cut.

### **Inside Turkey**

Turkish colonialism begins within Turkey's state boundaries, where the Kurdish region is treated as though it were a colony. As every week, there have been military operations closing down rural areas. This time, these were [in the Lice district of Diyarbakır](#) (Amed), where Turkish soldiers and village guards claim to have killed two PKK fighters. And as every week, people active in opposition to the government have been detained in raids on their homes. This time detentions took place in Şırnak [on Tuesday](#), and in İzmir, Antalya, Kocaeli and Konya [on Wednesday](#).

A [report by Meltem Oktay and Ali Ammar](#) for Özgür Politika has described how state-linked troll networks are being used to fertilise and entrench anti-Kurdish racism on the internet so as to allow the authorities to divide and rule.

And a hospital in the Kurdish majority city of Siirt (Sêrt) has [refused to treat](#) a Kurdish woman with hearing problems because she didn't speak Turkish, even though there were Kurdish speaking staff available.

Often in these reviews I have mentioned prisoners who have been refused parole for arbitrary "lack of good behaviour". A [report by the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey](#) has put a figure on the number of people affected by these cruel decisions: at least 426 in 2023.

On a more positive note, Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality has restored and reopened its multilingual nurseries, which were closed down when the city was taken over by government trustees; though the children who attend those nurseries still have to go on to education in Turkish.

## **In Iran**

On Monday, it was two years since the death of Jina Amini at the hands of Iran's morality police, which triggered an uprising across Iran. The movement was suppressed with extreme state violence, but that can't eliminate history: the brave young women defying archaic rules, the new links between different minority groups at different ends of the country. Amnesty International [has described](#) "the devastating consequences of the authorities' brutal crackdown on the 'Woman Life Freedom' uprising amid systematic impunity for crimes under international law". They describe increasingly draconian veiling laws for women, and increasing use of the death penalty. But all that didn't stop Kurdish cities marking the anniversary of Jina's death with a [general strike](#) that shut down shops across the region. Like last year, Jina's parents were prevented from visiting her grave, or even going out of the house; and access to the cemetery was blocked with flood water deliberately released from a dam.

## **Refugees under attack**

At the beginning of this review, I touched on Europe's grovelling to Turkey. Nowhere is this more evident than in the extradition of refugees and asylum seekers, who will be destined to spend years, if not decades, in a Turkish prison. On Thursday, Kurdish refugee, Idris Kaplan, was [detained at his home in France and taken to Vincennes detention centre for deportation](#). The Democratic Kurdish Council of France comment, "Kaplan faces at least 25 years in prison in Turkey, a country where Kurdish rights are systematically violated and political persecution, repression and torture are commonplace... By deporting him, France would be violating not only Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [the right to life, liberty and security of person], but also the principle of non-refoulement enshrined in the Geneva Convention, which prohibits the return of a person to a country where he would be at risk of torture, persecution or inhuman treatment." His lawyer has [asked the European Court of Human Rights](#) for an urgent intervention. This follows [three other extraditions](#) of Kurds from France to Turkey last spring.

The same day in Germany, Selahattin Erkul, who was still waiting on the result of his asylum application, was [detained when he went to the immigration office](#) in Kiel to renew his residence permit, and was taken to Hamburg airport for deportation. Erkul had not been notified about possible refusal of asylum, and faces a long prison term in Turkey.

Such returns look set to become increasingly common, thanks to a combination of deference to Turkey and hardening attitudes towards refugees in general.

Immigrant advocate organisation, [PRO-ASYL](#), [point out](#) that, in the first half of this year, 1,600 Turkish citizens came to Germany to seek asylum, the majority of them Kurdish, and that the success rate for their asylum claims had fallen to only 13%, due to a very high burden of proof and uncritical acceptance of Turkish accusations by the German authorities.

Germany brought in [new temporary border controls](#) on Monday, cutting across the Schengen Zone and ending free movement in Europe. This followed the adoption of a new EU migration pact last spring that has been described as [hollowing out the right to asylum](#). The Netherlands have [asked to opt out of EU asylum rules all together](#) in order to bring in the “toughest refugee regime ever”, but this is very unlikely to be agreed.

One way Germany gets round the restrictions on extradition, while still currying favour with Turkey, is to imprison Kurdish activists themselves, including activists they have extradited from other countries. They are currently [attempting to extradite](#) a prominent member of the Kurdish Women’s Movement, Gülhatun Kara, who has been living in France since 1991, but worked for a while in Germany. [Roj Info observed in June](#), “To date, 13 Kurdish activists are detained or imprisoned in Germany in connection with the PKK ban. The Cologne-based legal aid fund AZADÎ has observed an increase in extradition requests from Germany for Kurdish activists residing in other European countries over the past two years. About ten Kurdish activists have been handed over to Germany since 2022.”

## **Öcalan and the Right to Hope**

For Kurds, the most important legal case by far is that of Abdullah Öcalan, whose conditions of imprisonment break many rules. The week began with a [press conference in Brussels](#) by a sample of the over 1,500 lawyers from more than 30 countries who have recently submitted a joint application to visit Öcalan and the other prisoners in İmralı island prison. They don’t expect this to be granted, but they want to draw attention to his total isolation. The conference called for more action from governments and international organisations.

One of the rules broken by Turkey’s treatment of Öcalan is his right to the possibility of parole and release, described as his Right to Hope. This right was recognised in a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights in 2014, but the Turkish government has ignored the court. When that happens the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers – the foreign ministers of member states, or their deputies – can try and persuade the

errant state to act, and if that fails can decide to restrict the state's ability to take full part in Council of Europe Affairs. For Öcalan, it was seven years before his case was put on the Committee agenda and Turkey was asked for an action plan. The plan came late and offered no significant change. Another request produced another plan that was no better than the last. This week the Committee [discussed the case again](#) – and postponed any discussion of committee action for yet another year.

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