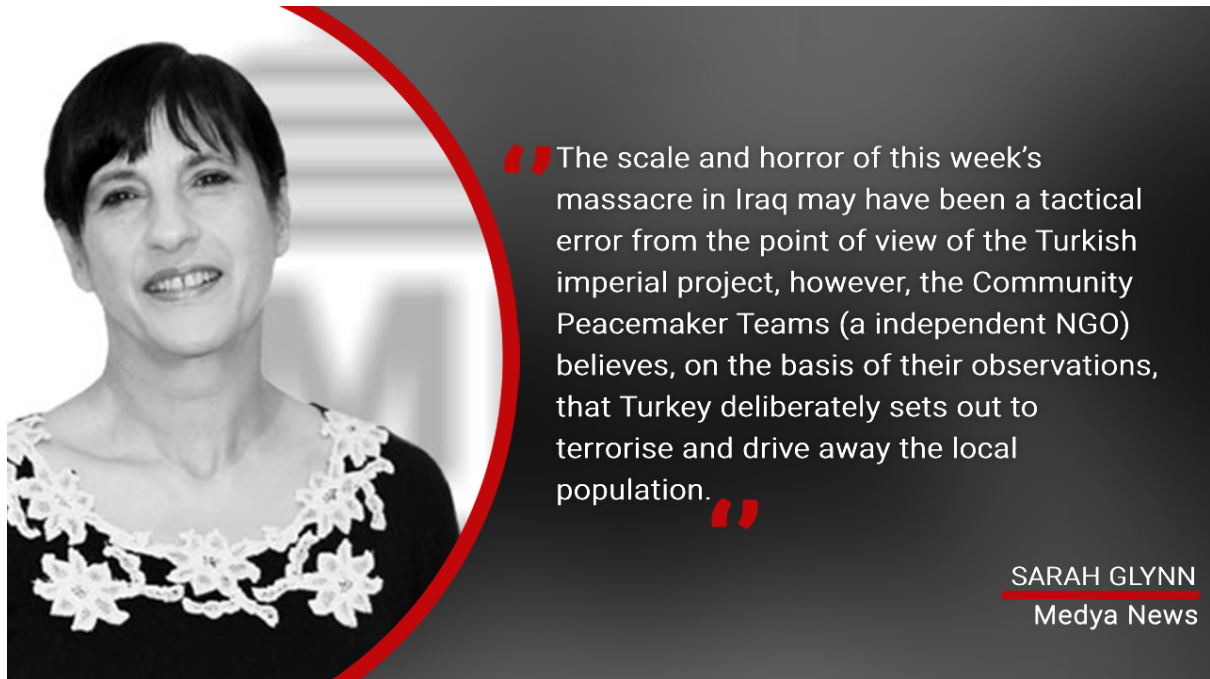


# A massacre too far? – a weekly news review

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[1:11 pm 23/07/2022](#)



## Sarah Glynn

On Wednesday afternoon, a group of tourists who had escaped the heat of the Iraqi plains for the cooler mountains of Duhok were enjoying a popular picnic spot in Zakho district when they came under attack from the nearby Turkish military base of Khatir. Four artillery strikes left nine people dead, including a baby and two other children, and wounded over twenty others. By Wednesday night, protestors were burning Turkish flags in Iraqi cities.

This is far from the first time that civilians have been killed in Turkey's military campaign in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, or even Turkey's first attack on this village. The Community Peacemaker Teams in Iraq (formerly the Christian Peacemaker Teams) has kept a record of civilian casualties in the region and of Turkey's expanding military presence. They have counted 138 civilians known to have been killed by the Turkish military since August 2015, and there were probably more. In a report issued in June, the Peacemaker Teams described an interview with a father and son from the village who, when irrigating their orchard, were injured by artillery fire from one of the two new Turkish military bases nearby. The NGO, which is careful to steer clear of PKK politics, commented, "From his hospital bed, Nazir Omer told CPT that in October 2021, around 150 Turkish soldiers descended on Parakhe from their newly constructed base above. The soldiers proceeded from house to house, warning residents that if they collaborated with the PKK, the village would be fired upon. While the residents of Parakhe state that PKK members do not operate in the village, they have reported hearing artillery shells land twice around Parakhe in the months preceding the recent attack."

To anyone who has taken the trouble to investigate what is happening in northern Iraq, and not just accepted Turkey's claim that they are merely performing "counter-terrorism" operations against the PKK, it is soon clear that Turkey is carrying out an invasion, with no plans for a future retreat. The scale and horror of this week's attack may have been a tactical error from the point of view of the Turkish imperial project, however, the Peacemaker Teams believe, on the basis of their observations, that Turkey deliberately sets out to terrorise and drive away the local population. Their June report continues, "In addition to committing a war crime by directly targeting civilians, CPT-IK (CPT Iraqi Kurdistan) fears that the Turkish military intends to pressure Parakhe villagers into abandoning their homes and lands creating a landscape 'cleansed' of the civilian population around Turkish military bases. This practice has been observed in areas adjacent to dozens of bases throughout the border regions. Such forced civilian displacements and restrictions on access to livelihood are breaches of international humanitarian law." In June 2021, the Peacemaker Teams estimated that "more than 1,500 civilians from

22 villages have evacuated their villages to escape Turkey's assault", which was begun the previous April.

These independent observations are very much in line with the analysis of the Kurdish freedom movement. Aldar Khalil, of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in North and East Syria, comments that Turkey "wants to empty the region of its residents, and send a message to the Iraqi people and southern Kurdistan. Just as it did in northern Kurdistan, they are trying to stop civilian life and tourist places, and turn them into military areas, with the aim of continuing the occupation."

As for Turkey, they have done what they always do, and blamed the PKK. Their Bagdad embassy flew their flag at half mast, their press release expressed their "deep sorrow", claiming that they are "against all kinds of attacks targeting civilians." This may not convince most people in Iraq, but their version of events has been readily taken up by the Turkish government's loyal supporters, and it has muddied the waters sufficiently to prevent Turkey's NATO allies from naming Turkey as the perpetrator. We have witnessed a series of condemnations – from the United States, the United Nations, and European countries – that omit to say who they are condemning. In the last two days, after the killings, the surrounding area has continued to be subjected to artillery bombardments.

Even when the PKK are not blamed directly, the argument is made that without their presence there would be no Turkish attacks. This is the line taken by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government and works closely with Turkey. They seem not to care that Turkey is effectively occupying an increasing area of their 'autonomous' region. The PKK has been in the region since the time that the KDP, too, were unrecognised freedom fighters, and their numbers increased when, in 2013, as part of the abortive peace negotiations, an agreement was made with Turkey for the PKK to withdraw across the border. Although the Iraqi government were not happy with this arrangement, it was agreed with the Kurdistan Regional Government; and when, in 2014 the PKK played a vital role in

defeating ISIS, the KDP welcomed them as brothers. Now, instead, the KDP welcomes the opportunity to see off their political rivals.

The statement by the Kurdistan Regional Government's Council of Ministers acknowledged Turkish responsibility, but treated the massacre as an unfortunate accident resulting from the "clashes between Turkish forces and PKK fighters" which "have become a constant threat to the lives and wellbeing of our citizens".

Even in the aftermath of a massacre, the KDP response has been to exert authoritarian control. A protest planned to take place in Hewlêr (Erbil) on Friday afternoon was prevented by security forces. Journalists had their cameras taken, and at least five activists were detained. (The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has become a dangerous place to protest and write. Five other activists and journalists, who were imprisoned two years ago after a widely criticised trial and whose release was promised after Eid al-Adha, are still behind bars and have started a death fast in protest.)

Turkey has killed Iraqi civilians before. They have even carried out a fatal attack on a popular tourist resort, bombing Kani Masi near Slemani in 2020. But this time the reaction has been different. It is partly the scale of the casualties, which turns it from an attack into a massacre, but also, tellingly, the ethnicity of the victims. These were not Kurds but Arabs, as all the headlines spelt out. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have compared the Zakho massacre with the Roboski Massacre in south east Turkey in 2011, when the Turkish military bombed a group of young men and boys who were simply smuggling cigarettes and diesel across the Iraq/Turkey border, as they regularly had to do to survive. In both cases, the Turkish military murdered large numbers of civilians and has refused to take the blame, but the 34 Roboski victims were Kurds, and their fate was made to seem insignificant to many of their Turkish neighbours.

Anger at this weeks' mass murder of Iraqi holiday-makers has brought together Iraqis across political divisions. Shiite groups have dominated the resistance to Turkish intervention, and Muqtada al-Sadr was quick to mobilise

his supporters and to call for the closing of borders and the cancellation of security agreements. No political leader or organisation can afford to stand on the side-lines. Even the President of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Nechirvan Barzani, whose public statement avoided putting the blame on his close Turkish allies, attempted to turn popular anger to his advantage by being pictured carrying the coffin of the murdered baby. There have been protests outside Turkish consulates and the Bagdad embassy, and calls for a boycott of Turkish goods. Demonstrations in Iraqi cities are still growing and spreading.

Iraq's Foreign Minister has confirmed that Iraqi investigations have proved Turkey's guilt, and he has said that they will bring up the attack at the United Nations. The Iraqi prime minister, Mustafa al-Kadhimi, has called a national day of mourning, and Iraq's Ministerial Council on National Security has demanded a formal apology from Turkey and called on them to withdraw all forces from Iraq. Iraq will recall their chargé d'affaires in Ankara for consultations and will delay sending their planned new ambassador to Turkey. This is a much stronger response than that given to any previous Turkish aggression in Iraq, though Iraq's ability to act against Turkey is limited. Interest by international media has been relatively slight and fleeting.

### **The threat hanging over the Rojava Revolution**

The vast majority of Turkish media chose to ignore the massacre and focus instead on President Erdoğan's renewed threats to carry out another invasion into the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria. The day before the massacre, Tuesday 19 July, was commemorated by activists across the world as the tenth anniversary of the establishment of that autonomous control – in what was then named simply Rojava, or West Kurdistan, but has since expanded to include a much wider and more ethnically mixed area. The anniversary coincided with the latest meeting between the presidents of Russia, Turkey and Iran to discuss the future of Syria, and all eyes were on Tehran, where Turkey was trying to persuade Russia to facilitate their planned invasion by allowing them access to Syrian airspace.

The joint statement put out by the three leaders following the tripartite meeting was very similar to those following previous meetings. It highlighted the “sovereignty and territorial integrity” of Syria, condemned “terrorism”, rejected “illegitimate self-rule initiatives”, and avoided any comment on Turkey’s role in dividing the country. The three external powers talked about a “Syrian-led and Syrian owned political process” as they attempted to control Syria’s future.

How the meeting might impact actions on the ground is still unclear. The Rojava Information Centre concludes that “Despite Moscow’s & Tehran’s apparent refusal to give Erdoğan the ‘green light’ for another incursion into [North and East Syria], he may go at it unilaterally.” And that “The longest-lasting effect of Turkey’s threats may just be the unprecedented access the SDF [Syrian Democratic Forces] has been forced to grant the [Syrian Arab Army] & Iran so as to be able to defend its territory.” Erdoğan could spin this as a win, though he would, of course, want to see them pushed much further – as would Russia.

In his speech following the Tehran meeting, Vladimir Putin made no concessions to North and East Syrian autonomy, which has been made especially unacceptable to Russian eyes by its reliance on American support: “We will continue to closely monitor and effectively suppress any external forces’ attempts to use militants on Syrian territory to attain their own selfish geopolitical objectives in the Middle East or elsewhere. This was the context for our discussion of the aggravated situation in northeastern Syria, east of the Euphrates, where, with the support of certain countries, attempts are being made to consolidate the illegal foreign military presence and incite separatist sentiments in violation of the Syrian state’s sovereignty. Russia reaffirmed its principled approach: the area to the east of the Euphrates should return under the control of the legitimate government of Syria.” For the Autonomous Authority, the question remains how to negotiate a future with Damascus that does not destroy all their precious autonomy.

At the same time as the three external powers were meeting in Tehran, the PYD’s Aldar Khalil was telling the tenth anniversary celebration in Qamishlo,

“Before the revolution, we had different opinions, but the majority supported getting rid of the regime & building a democratic & free society... We didn’t want to participate in that system, but to change it. [The problem] is the regime, controlled by a single person. We tried to build institutions controlled by the people. But if you don’t change the mentality you can’t change anything. How to change it? Don’t control through authority, instead, we should rely on the youth & women. Since the first moments of this revolution, we have been attacked. After 10 years of this revolution, we have to recognize that our party is against the regime.” It was nice – and fortuitous – that this week also saw an approving reference to the example set by the Rojava model in a comment piece by George Monbiot for the Guardian.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues their daily attacks on North and East Syria, unimpeded and uncommented on by either Russia or the United States. Turkish drone attacks killed two SDF soldiers travelling to visit their families on Wednesday, injured SDF soldiers on Thursday, and killed three soldiers from the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) yesterday. Villages face constant bombing, and the Tel Tamir electricity station has been knocked out again.

### **In authoritarian Turkey**

In Turkey itself, pictures of demonstrators surrounded by a deep ring of helmeted police have become all too familiar. This time, the police were preventing commemorations in Istanbul of the 2015 bomb attack that killed 33 young people in Suruç as they prepared to go and help the children of Kobanê recover from the ISIS siege.

In Turkey, nowhere is safe – especially not online. It has been revealed that Turkish internet providers have been forced to assist in mass-surveillance, providing the government with non-anonymised data of all their clients’ internet activities since the beginning of 2021. The government now know every website that a person visits, and for how long. They can also work out who is contacting whom via internet-based applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, or Signal, provided both parties are connected through Turkish

internet service providers (though they can't see the content of the messages).

There are still occasional reminders that Turkey is officially signed up to the European Charter of Human Rights, but opportunities to pursue those rights get ever slimmer. A week ago, Turkey's Constitutional Court found that Figen Yüksekdağ, imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP, had been illegally deprived of her rights to freedom of thought and expression and to engage in political activity when she was stripped of her parliamentary immunity in 2016; but there seems no chance that this will be allowed to make any difference to her circumstances.

### **No help from Europe's leaders**

As observed many times, campaigners for rights and freedoms can expect little help from the official representatives of European governments, or from the European Union. Any residual hopes should have been extinguished by the photographs of a beaming Ursula von der Leyen, the EU Commissioner, alongside Azerbaijan's President Aliyev, after she had signed an agreement with this "trustworthy energy supplier". To replace Russian gas, the EU has gone cap in hand to a man accused of corruption, authoritarianism, and war crimes.

The European Union's new Terrorism Situation and Trend Report observes that "No PKK terrorist attacks have been reported by Member States during 2021", and that PKK demonstrations are typically non-violent; but that hasn't prevented numerous arrests and convictions for membership or support of a foreign terrorist organisation, especially in Germany.

The report singles out the attempted occupation, last December, of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, in the Hague, when activists tried to make the international body respond to reports of the use of chemical weapons by Turkey against the PKK in Iraq. It does not explain how this action could be considered as "terrorism". Since Belgium's courts ruled, in



2020, that the PKK cannot be considered a terrorist organisation, all PKK cases in Belgium have resulted in acquittals .

Concerns have been raised in the Bundestag over Germany's Federal Prosecutor General's recent two-day visit to Turkey's Supreme Court Chief Prosecutor. The German government has refused to say what was discussed, but Turkish media has reported that Turkey handed over a list of 129 people they want to see extradited.

As Erdoğan reminded Sweden and Finland that Turkey can still veto their NATO accession if they don't comply with all Turkey's demands, the head of the Swedish security services has called for demonstrating in support of the PKK to be punishable as a criminal offence.

There is no shortage of reminders that if we want to see change, we need to act ourselves, and not wait for the politicians. In fact, constant vigilance and action is needed just to avoid losing the freedoms previous generations have already won.

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