

# Normalising fascism – a weekly news review

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I couldn't help wondering if they would have been equally unperturbed if they had been reporting on Hitler's Germany. That thought kept coming into my head as I read the European Commission's latest report on Turkey, which was published on Tuesday. Turkey is still a candidate for EU membership, even though accession negotiations are currently on indefinite hold, and the report looks at progress or otherwise towards agreed norms across different areas. Although this report is more critical of Turkey than in previous years, with repeated references to 'backsliding' in vital areas such as democracy, judicial independence, and human rights, it is couched in the language of normality. And it begins with a firm reminder that 'Turkey remains a key partner for the European Union.'

Tensions with Greece and Cyprus in the Eastern Mediterranean provide a major source of concern, but Turkey's brutal military campaigns against other neighbours and further afield are summed up as "backsliding in the framework of political dialogue on foreign and security policy as Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy collided with the EU priorities under the common foreign and security policy."

For the first time, Turkey is referred to as an 'occupying power' in northern Syria, however, despite their three major unprovoked invasions, their support for ISIS and other militant jihadi groups, their ethnic cleansing of Kurds and other non-Arab groups, their elevation of predatory mercenary gangs, and their with-holding of Syria's vital river water, the report claims "Turkey wants to see a stable and prosperous Syria, an objective it shares with the EU."

Turkey's invasion and attempted occupation of the northern part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where they are expanding their permanent military presence, and where the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has accused them of a concerted campaign of chemical warfare against their guerrillas, is glossed over as continued 'anti-terrorism operations'.

Meanwhile, in a parallel universe, Turkey is further increasing their military spending, and renewing the government mandate for "cross-border operations and interventions to foreign countries". And survivors of Turkey's attacks in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq have been describing their experience. Armanc Simko explained on video, "That gas was responsible for the deaths of six friends in the tunnel. Despite the fact that I only inhaled a small amount of that gas, I couldn't come to my senses for 4 hours. I still don't remember anything that happened until the next day... Even though it's been two months, I still feel the effects; I forget most things and can't control my body's reflexes." Along with two other guerrilla survivors, Simko told of gases pumped into their tunnels through hoses, and other gases forced deep into the mountain by powerful explosions; of a gas that smelt like burnt sugar, and of another that smelt like bleach and resulted in long lingering death: "Comrade Baz was struggling to breathe, his heart was racing fast and deep, and his pulse was irregular. When we attempted to do a cardiac massage to save him, yellow

bubbly water came out of his mouth and nose. Comrade Baz died there as a result of suffocation caused by chemical gas.”

In an interview for Medyanews, PKK commander Murat Karayılan has compared Turkey’s current campaign in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which began six months ago today, to the 1998 expulsion of Abdullah Öcalan from Syria and Öcalan’s final capture. He sees parallels not only in the shared aim of depriving the Kurdish freedom movement of coordination, but also in the complicity of international powers. He calls on international institutions to come and investigate the evidence of chemical attack, but most international leaders and mainstream media outlets don’t even acknowledge the existence of this war.

Asked what the result would be if the US and EU removed the PKK from their terrorism lists, Karayılan responded, “Most likely, the war would end and a new process would begin...These states are supporting the war with this decision they made about us. Effectively, they are supporting the persecution in Kurdistan.”

When the terrorism designation was tested in the Belgian courts, the judges ruled that the PKK should not be considered a terrorist organisation because it is a party in a non-international armed conflict, which makes it subject to the laws of war and not criminal law. But decisions on listing are made on political grounds. Turkey wants the PKK branded as terrorists, and Turkey is a NATO ally, an important trading partner, and a holding centre for refugees who would otherwise come to Europe.

Thus, Turkey gets away with aggression against its own citizens and with the invasion and occupation of neighbouring land under the guise of action against terrorism. And, with Turkey accusing everyone who shares Öcalan’s political philosophy or supports Kurdish culture of PKK links, so those countries who have adopted Turkey’s listing of the PKK can find themselves complicit in legitimising ever greater authoritarianism and crushing of rights and freedoms.

Alleged PKK links form the basis of the Turkish Government's attack on the pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which already has thousands of members in prison and faces potential closure. The HDP's former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, has given his first face to face interview since being imprisoned five years ago. Beril Eski of Kısa Dalga asked him about the relationship between the HDP and the PKK in light of the recent discussions that followed on from the comment by the Republican People's Party (CHP) that the HDP were legitimate negotiators for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish Question. Demirtaş explained that while the HDP were legitimate negotiators, the solution also had to include those who had taken up armed struggle; and he pointed out that "Those who say 'PKK equals HDP' are both wrong and misleading. The HDP does not and cannot represent anyone other than the masses who support it. It does not represent an armed structure at all. Nor is it its political arm or extension. The HDP is a democratic, constitutional party waging a political struggle." He further noted that "even the PKK does not accept the HDP as its spokesperson or representative in any way".

In 2015, President Erdoğan made a decision to turn his back on the peace process begun in 2013 and enter the current spiral of aggressive nationalism. In his interview, Demirtaş emphasised that, at the point when Erdoğan repudiated the negotiated peace agreement, the PKK was within days of disabling their weapons, but "Seeing that lasting peace would not reflect positively on him and his party's vote rate, Erdoğan ended the process."

Alongside the ongoing bombing in Iraq, Turkey is continuing their low-level but persistent breaches of the ceasefire agreements they signed following their last major invasion of northern Syria in 2019.

On Monday, the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) of North and East Syria announced the arrest of a cell of six militants who had been carrying out sabotage operations in Raqqa. North Press Agency reported that, "The Asayish media office in Raqqa released confessions of the cell admitting that they were receiving funds for their operations by officials of the Turkish-backed SNA, who were former leaders within the ranks of the Islamic State (ISIS)." The captured men claimed that they "smuggled IEDs into Raqqa in

order to blast them later in addition to carrying out assassination attempts against officials of Asayish. They also counterfeited currencies.”

This week has seen a resumption of attacks by Turkey and their mercenaries on villages in Tel Tamir, an area where most residents have already been forced to leave their homes to escape Turkish bombardment.

On Wednesday, Turkish mercenaries also shelled Tal Rifaat, in Shebha, where many of the displaced families from Afrîn have taken shelter; and a Turkish drone attack hit two civilian vehicles in the centre of Kobanê, killing two people and wounding four others. In the wake of last week’s sabre rattling by Turkey and their evidence-free claims of attacks by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), SDF Commander in Chief, Mazloun Abdi, responded to the drone attack with a Tweet, “At a time when all Syrians are demanding peace, the Turkish occupation violates the agreements. The bombing of civilians in Kobanê is an attempt to provoke a war in the region.”

In their 2022 budget, Turkey plans to increase defence spending by 30% to 181 billion TL, or around 3.5% of GDP – which is considerably more than the 123 billion TL allotted for health. (For comparison, the UK spends almost five times as much on health as on defence.)

At the same time, the crackdown within Turkey continues to hit opposition politicians and progressive organisations. This week, more HDP members were detained, and Ayşe Gökkan, Term Spokesperson for the Free Women’s Movement and former mayor of Nusaybin, was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment.

The Rojava Information Centre has commented on the rising tensions: “Russian, Syrian and Turkish military units around Azaz and northern Aleppo have been amassing reinforcements, on high alert for another Turkish invasion... Turkey wants to use the G20 summit (Oct 30) to lobby Biden about its bid to buy F-16s. This may delay further action for now. In July Turkey was put on the US list of states implicated in child soldier recruitment, restricting them from buying US arms. Biden waived this on Oct. 8.”

On the day that Turkish drones killed civilians in Kobanê and Turkish mercenaries shelled Shebha, the US embassy in Syria tweeted another of their messages that appear to apportion blame to both sides: "The United States deplores the October 20 upsurge in violence and attacks in Syria. We call on all parties to respect existing ceasefires, focus on immediate de-escalation, and above all to protect civilian lives." This is hardly encouraging for those looking to the US to hold back Turkey's attacks.

This week, UN-sponsored talks continued – unproductively – to try and agree a new Syrian Constitution. They are still allowing no representation from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES).

But not all international action has been supportive of the Turkish government or dismissive of Kurdish interests.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international watchdog established by the G7, has placed Turkey on their "grey list". As the FATF president explained, "Turkey needs to show it is effectively tackling complex money laundering cases and show it is pursuing terrorist financing prosecutions... and prioritizing cases of UN-designated terrorist organizations such as ISIL and al Qaeda". Of course, in this example, ruling against Turkey is in the interests of international capital, but as foreign investors heed the warning the Turkish Lira will come under even more pressure. The Lira has also taken an additional hit as a consequence of Erdoğan's insistence on interest rate cuts. He fired the man at the central bank who was opposing these, and on Thursday the rate was reduced from 18% to 16%.

Economic pressures will further reduce support for Erdoğan and his AKP. Already, for the first time, polling figures for the AKP electoral coalition have dropped below those for the opposition coalition of the CHP and Good Party.

On Wednesday, the Parliament of Catalonia made history by recognising AANES. The agreed motion also underlined the potential of AANES' political philosophy of Democratic Confederalism, and called for practical solidarity with reconstruction in the region. The Catalan parliament

has limited power, and particular sympathies with autonomous areas, but this is a start and could be an example for others.

Also this week, the European Court of Human Rights ruled in favour of a man convicted for insulting the Turkish president – a charge that has seen thousands of people sentenced. The judges found that his freedom of expression had been violated, and they demanded a change in Turkish law so that the head of state no longer has privileged protection from insult and people are not afraid to voice their opinions. Again, this is only a start and will need to be firmly followed up as Turkey has not hesitated to ignore its obligation to abide by the court's decisions.

One of the decisions Turkey has not respected is the European Court's demand for the release of businessman/philanthropist, Osman Kavala. On Monday, the fourth anniversary of his detention, ten ambassadors (from Canada, France, Finland, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden and the United States) together wrote a call for his release. The Turkish Government reacted with predictable anger, summoning the ambassadors to the Foreign Ministry, and Erdoğan threatened their expulsion. He told reporters, "Those who defend this leftover of [George] Soros are striving to get him released. I told our foreign minister that we can't have the luxury to host them in our country." And he asked, "Do you release bandits, killers or terrorists in your country?" At the same time, he lashed out at Selahattin Demirtaş, who is also being kept in prison despite European Court of Human Rights rulings: "And now, the HDP is striving to get Selahattin Demirtaş released. The guy is a terrorist." Demirtaş and Kavala are still waiting for their trials, but that hasn't stopped Erdoğan declaring them both guilty. What happens next depends on how the Council of Europe responds to Turkey's contempt of their court.

The majority of politicians will not move beyond ultimately meaningless gestures without considerable pressure from below. Pressure is growing, but it has a long way to go if it is to yield results. Karayılan's observations (in the interview quoted above) about lack of support from the international left are a sad reminder of how much remains to be done.

