

Impunity to murder – a weekly news review

In the space of four days, Turkey murdered nine people in Syria and Iraq. In examining these attacks, this week's news review looks at their implications in international law, and at a lack of international response that has allowed Turkey to murder with impunity. Some of the attacks, together with the KDP's direct support for Turkey's war against the PKK, have led to condemnation of the KDP and the Barzanis for "betraying" the Kurdish people. Meanwhile, in Iran, massive security failed to stop protests marking the anniversary of Jina Amini's death, but questions remain over how to take protest to a new level. And with world leaders gathered in New York, we observe, yet again, the failure of international organisations that claim to protect peace and human rights.

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In the space of four days, Turkey murdered nine people in Syria and Iraq. I have already talked about last Friday's [attack in Minbic](#), which killed three members of the YPJ – the Women's Protection Units that are part of North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF. On Sunday, also in North and East Syria, a Turkish drone [hit a car](#) belonging to the Autonomous Region's internal security forces (Asayish) that was travelling between Amude and Qamishlo. After rescuers rushed to the scene, Turkey struck again. Two members of the Asayish were killed and eight civilians were injured. Also on Sunday, another Turkish drone targeted a [car in Şengal](#), the Yazidi area of Iraq. This killed three members of the Şengal Resistance Union (YBŞ), the Yazidi's self-defence forces that were built up after the Yazidi genocide in order to fight back against ISIS. The next day, Monday, Turkey struck Arbat Airport near Sulaymaniyah in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, killing three members of the Counter-Terrorism Group of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which has been working to combat ISIS cells alongside the United States and the SDF. And also on Monday, an armed attacker, presumed to be linked to Turkey, entered the office of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) in Erbil and killed the KNK's representative there.

Unprovoked aggression

The Turkish Government would no doubt argue that security forces are legitimate targets in time of war; but that presupposes that the war itself can be justified. Unprovoked attack, or aggressive war, was described by the Nuremberg Tribunal as the "supreme international crime", and aggressive war is what Turkey has been carrying out in both North and East Syria and in Şengal. Turkey faces no threat from the YPJ and Asayish, nor from the YBŞ. All three are only interested in defending their respective areas. They have fought against attacks by violent Islamist groups – including ISIS – that have been supported by Turkey; and fighters defending North and East Syria have come up against the Turkish military – but only because Turkey invaded.

Assassination

[Deniz Cevdet Bülbün](#), the KNK representative in Erbil, was a civilian. He was born in the Gever district of Hakkâri (Colemêrg), Turkey, in 1987, and focused

on the preservation and teaching of Kurdish language, culture, and history. Like so many Kurdish activists, he spent some time in prison. He was part of the Peoples Assembly of Gever, and after being forced to leave Turkey, he spent three years working with the Rojava Revolution before moving to Erbil in 2019. In his work for the KNK, he tried to promote Kurdish unity. Protests against his killing have been held across the Kurdish diaspora.

Turkey has made a habit of assassinating Kurds exiled in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. They have no qualms about sticking a terrorist label on someone they don't like and then killing them. Bülbün was no terrorist, but it shouldn't be forgotten that even someone who might qualify for that nebulous title would only be considered a legitimate target for an armed attack in certain circumstances. The UN Charter bans the use of force against other states, but makes an exception (in [article 51](#)) for cases of self-defence. In these cases, long-established practice demands that any violent action be necessary, proportionate, and without alternative options; though this is a rule that has been increasingly broken by different states at different times. There is debate over the legitimacy of pre-emptive self-defence, but for a pre-emptive strike against a terrorist to be seen as legally justified, the threat would need to be imminent.

The attack on the PUK

The attack on the airport, which the Iraqi government has [confirmed](#) was carried out by a Turkish drone, follows other Turkish action against the PUK, which dominates the southern part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, including the city of Sulaymaniyah. Turkey has blocked access to Turkish airspace for flights to and from Sulaymaniyah's main airport since 5 April, [reducing traffic by 40%](#), and on 7 April, they carried out an earlier [drone attack](#) on the area of operation of the PUK's counter-terrorism forces. Turkey's hostility towards the PUK centres on the PUK's refusal to kowtow to them, and especially on the PUK's cooperation with the SDF in the fight against ISIS. Turkey insists that the SDF are terrorists, and attempts to [portray](#) the PUK as under the control of the PKK. Of course, the United States has a tactical alliance with the SDF too,

much to Turkey's annoyance, but directly targeting America is a bit more complicated.

On the occasion of Turkey's April attack, Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of the SDF, and Ilhan Ahmed, President of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council, were both visiting Sulaymaniyah, and there is debate as to whether the drones, which caused no casualties, had been intended to hit their convoy or simply to serve as a warning. Abdi and Ahmed were travelling with an American military escort, which would also have been in the firing line. This time, on Monday, there were [claims](#) (including by Turkey) that SDF personnel ("PKK/YPG terrorists" in Turkey's words) were carrying out a training exercise with the PUK. But the Kurdistan Region's Deputy Prime Minister, who is himself a member of the PUK, has [insisted](#) that no other forces were present.

Impunity

The link to the International Coalition's fight against ISIS, and the fact that the victims were peshmerga, ensured a wave of international statements of condemnation over the airport attack and its breaching of Iraqi sovereignty, including from the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union. And the Iraqi Government [publicly condemned](#) Turkey's repeated military attacks, promising to summon the Turkish ambassador and give him a note of protest for the president. However, this relatively low-key response is in striking contrast to [current events in Canada](#), where India has been accused of carrying out the targeted killing of a Canadian Sikh separatist, and the situation has developed into a major diplomatic crisis.

Turkey's other attacks have been hardly remarked upon outwit local and Kurdish media. The exception was a [tweet](#) from Luxembourg's Foreign Minister that expressed his deep regrets at the YPJ killings, and added that he had met the most senior of the three murdered women in 2016 "to express support in the common battle against the Islamic State." In general, though, the message is clear: Turkey can continue to carry out targeted killings, assassinations, and other attacks with impunity.

Bradost

Alongside Turkey's attacks, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the most dominant political party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), has continued to build up their forces in the Bradost district, which is near the Turkish border to the north and the Iranian border to the east. This is a mountainous area, where the PKK has bases, and provides the PKK with an important link between their main base in the Qandil mountains to the southeast and their bases in the areas of Avaşin, Zap, Metina and Haftanin to the northwest, along the Turkish border.

Within Bradost, Sidakan and Choman were also the locations of camps run by Kurdish parties exiled from Iran: the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI) and Komala. They have vacated their camps in compliance with the 19 September deadline set by an agreement made between Iran and Iraq. On the deadline day, Tuesday, Iraq's Defence Minister [announced](#), "We have limited the Iranian opposition forces to five camps in Iraq, Iraqi forces have been deployed on the border of Iraq and Iran, and we will not allow Iraq's sovereignty to be violated." It is still unclear whether Iran will accept that Iraq has done enough to defang these groups, and the threat of cross border attacks by Iran remains. Kurdistan Watch has [claimed](#) that the PKK has managed to take over most of the areas that had been occupied by the evicted parties.

All this would help to explain the KDP's focus on the area. They do not want to see either the Iraqi government or the PKK gain ground. But the KDP have also become increasingly active and prominent in their support of Turkey's campaign against the PKK and have already clashed with PKK guerrillas in Bradost. Now, worries of further intra-Kurdish violence have been increased by the KDP's [ultimatum](#) to local people living in Bradost. Roj News [reports](#) that 1286 families were told last Sunday that they had 24 hours to leave in order to escape possible war. In this mountainous region, there are gardens and vineyards, and many people are nomadic herders. They and their animals have been forced down from their summer pastures when it is still too hot and dry, and many things have had to be left behind. So far, at least, the KDP's anticipated attack has not materialised.

Betrayal

The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) is the umbrella body for all the organisations that follow Abdullah Öcalan's ideas and constitute the Kurdish Freedom Movement. In their [response](#) to the attacks in Iraq, and to the threat of worse to come in Bradost, they emphasised the key role of the "betrayal" of the Kurdish people that is being carried out by the KDP and the Barzani family that controls it: "These attacks and martyrdoms do not happen as a result of the strength of the enemy, but with the support of betrayal." The KCK stress the need to acknowledge and oppose how the Barzanis are helping the Turkish State in their drive to exterminate Kurds and Kurdishness.

The KCK response reinforced the message from [protests in Turkey](#) at the weekend against the KDP's role in Bradost – protests that were inevitably met with police violence and detentions. They also support the [comment](#) from the KNK's co-president, Ahmet Karamus, that the assassination of their representative in Erbil "could not have been executed without the assistance of Southern Kurdistan authorities".

The KDP's deal with Turkey might be compared to Indian maharajas who accepted British dominance in exchange for continuing their regal lifestyle and control over their local areas. But the Barzanis claim to be Kurdish liberators, not kings.

Iran

A week ago, the world was waiting to see what would happen in Iran on the anniversary of Jina Amini's death. In the event, [protests](#) did take place, even under the threatening shadow of overwhelming security forces, and despite the Iranian Government's [attempt to mock](#) them for being much smaller than last year; and in the Kurdish areas, and in some other places, shops were shut in a general strike. There was no large scale bloody clash, as had been feared, but at least [700 people](#) were detained, and the brutal [harassing](#) of the families of those killed a year ago will continue with each anniversary of their deaths. The demonstrations showed that anger against the government has not gone away, but they also raised questions about how this can be channelled to take

the protests to a new more effective level, especially beyond the Kurdish heartlands of the “Jina Revolution”.

The anniversary was marked by demonstrations across the world, but, as before, these highlighted the differences and tensions between nationalist – even royalist – Iranians, and more radical Kurds, who are also looking for greater Kurdish freedom and regional autonomy. Of course, supporters of the former Shah and people from wealthier backgrounds will be disproportionately present in the diaspora; nevertheless, these tensions do reflect different aspirations and tensions within Iran itself.

Meanwhile in Iran, a [new bill](#) that will impose even harsher restrictions on women has moved closer to implementation with its approval in the parliament on Wednesday.

New York and Strasbourg

The presidents of both Iran and Turkey were in New York this week for the General Assembly of the United Nations. The UN is a toothless body when it comes to interventions for peace – the purpose for which it was established. However, it provides a platform for heads of state to propagandise, and Erdoğan made full use of his half hour in the international limelight. In a [jaw-dropping speech](#) that painted his brutal oppressive and aggressive country as a paradigm of peaceful coexistence and good neighbourliness, he made sure to attack the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

The Administration is dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which has led the fight against ISIS and which prides itself on working with all the different ethnic and religious groups in the region. Erdoğan claimed that “the Syrian people are overwhelmed by PKK/PYD terrorist organisations and the radical groups organised on the basis of sectarian divisions...” and that Turkey, which has consistently been shown to be supporting ISIS and other violent jihadist groups, played the biggest part in the fight against ISIS. While most of his audience will have seen this speech for what it was, his anti-western rhetoric will have made some predisposed to listen to his story.

Before this depressing feat of mendacity, Erdoğan gave an extraordinarily bad-tempered interview to PBS News Hour. The [interviewer](#), Amna Nawaz, asked him about various political prisoners, including Selahattin Demirtaş, the former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Erdoğan responded: "He is a terrorist who caused the death of more than 200 people, and the judgment on this terrorist was given by the judiciary ..." And when Nawaz reminded him that "The European Court of Human Rights disagrees with that assessment", he burst out, "Don't interrupt. You have no right to interrupt. You're not going to interrupt me. And respect me. And you are going to respect the judgment of the judiciary as well."

As many have commented, if Nawaz lived in Turkey, she too would be in prison after those questions. For a Turkish audience, Erdoğan has made no secret of his power over the courts, assuring the crowd at his [victory rally](#) after the presidential election in May, that Demirtaş would never be released from jail under his rule, and seemingly delighting in the responding calls for imposition of the abolished death penalty. Moreover, the case against Demirtaş (which the European Court has proved is completely baseless) accuses him of causing 38 deaths, not 200, and has not yet come to judgement. In May the number Erdoğan picked was 51.

If one could believe United Nations speeches, [Iran](#), too, would be seen to be a model of equality, nonviolence and good neighbourliness, and opposed to extremism and fundamentalism.

A week ago, at the request of Iraq, the UN Security Council [agreed](#) to terminate the UN investigation into ISIS crimes, limiting the prospects of holding anyone to account for the genocide they committed.

The impotency of international organisations in the face of aggression becomes more and more evident. This week, politicians have been making vacuous public statements as Azerbaijan carries out ethnic cleansing in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh; and the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, after discussing Turkey's refusal to obey the ruling of the European Court of Human Rights and release [Demirtaş](#) and Osman [Kavala](#), has once

again kicked the ball into the long grass. The threat of restrictive sanctions on Turkey's participation in the Council of Europe appears to have receded. Defence of Human Rights is the Council's *raison d'être*. If council bodies can ignore their court's rulings without consequence, this raises serious questions over the purpose of the institution.

Yesterday, it was announced that Jina Amini and the Woman Life Freedom movement have been [nominated for the European Union's Sakharov Prize](#) for Freedom of Thought. The nomination was made by three groups: the centre-right, the liberals, and the social-democrats. This is virtue signalling by people who would mostly have little sympathy with the radical ideas behind the Woman Life Freedom slogan.

The power of resistance

I end another gruelling week with a question, but also with an answer. Like many others, I first became seriously interested in the Kurdish Freedom Movement when I saw how it was beginning to create a different sort of society in Syria, putting into practice many of the ideas that we were only dreaming about. For me, and for people everywhere, Rojava provided a source of hope. Now, every week I find myself writing about the latest attacks on that hope – on the Kurdish people and on all that they are trying to achieve. And sometimes I ask myself, why not stop?

But Kurds have not stopped. Despite the drones, Rojava university is [opening new faculties](#) and have announced an [academic partnership](#) with the Department of Sociology of Binghampton University, part of the State University of New York. People who have spent the best part of their lives in Turkish prisons remain as [committed to changing society](#) as when they were arrested. The HDP is preparing for a major congress when they will declare the new name under which they will take their work forward, sidestepping government plans to close them down. And, at every demonstration, I am greeted with a smile by my [friend](#) whose son has been imprisoned for life for a murder everyone knows he didn't commit. This power to resist – based on deep commitment and strong community bonds – is a source of hope and

inspiration every bit as important as the social changes being enacted in North and East Syria.

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