

The fairest words and the foulest deeds – a weekly news review

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Politics and hypocrisy have always gone together. This has not changed since Democritus observed, in ancient Greece, that “many, while performing the foulest deeds, use the fairest words.” In all the political actions that are impacting on the Kurds, hypocrisy is a constant thread.

This last week witnessed the spring sitting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and debates on issues such as preserving national minorities give full scope for hypocritical display. Delegates from Turkey’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) raised their concerns about the treatment of Muslims in Western Europe without once mentioning the

treatment of minorities in their own country, where the twenty million Kurds are not even recognised as a distinct group, and where mistreatment of non-Muslim religions has just been highlighted in the Annual Report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom. (The report recommends that Turkey be included on the special watch list for “engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom.”)

It could also be added that, while Islamophobia is a real and serious problem, the situation is not helped by the Turkish government’s use of mosques and religious organisations to promote their own intolerant right-wing ethno-religious politics.

The Council of Europe’s emergency debate on the functioning of democratic institutions in Turkey produced almost universal condemnation of the Turkish government, from all ends of the political spectrum, but when it came to criticising Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on Preventing Violence against Women, a Turkish AKP delegate was able to point out that the Convention has not yet been ratified by the government of the British rapporteur who co-wrote the Council report. Failure to keep to the standards that you criticise others for breaking is a common weakness in diplomatic debate.

And then there are all those fair words that are accompanied, not so much by foul deeds, but by lack of action – though it can be argued that lack of the action needed to stop foul deeds by others is itself a form of complicity. Democritus castigated those who fail to act, too, observing: “Cheats and hypocrites are those who do everything with words and do nothing with actions.”

Despite all the strongly worded concerns over Turkey’s destruction of democracy, and the fears that Turkey’s flouting of Council of Europe rules was damaging the organisation itself, only two speakers expressly called for action beyond talking and monitoring. Frank Schwabe, speaking for the Socialist Group, stated that if Turkey continued to ignore the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, “the Committee of Ministers will have to act accordingly and initiate proceedings, which in extreme cases could ultimately

lead to their expulsion from the Council of Europe". And the Peoples' Democratic Party's (HDP) Hişyar Özsoy, from Turkey, speaking for the European Left Group, observed that "it is high time for the Council and this Assembly to start considering the use of more effective means, mechanisms and procedures at their disposal other than simply having urgent debates, opinions, or statements of concern."

Among the most blatant political hypocrisies are those concerning the definition of "terrorism". Whether or not a group is considered to fall under that heading depends not on what they do, but on who they are struggling against. When the people of Syria resisted oppression by President Assad, western governments were keen to show them support; and when, in response to Assad's violent crackdown, opposition groups took up arms, this was accepted as unavoidable. Even when some of those groups embraced practices that rivalled the oppressive actions of the Syrian regime, their western backers remained reluctant to break ties with them. But those same western governments see no problem in branding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as terrorists for resisting oppression in Turkey. The PKK do not choose to achieve rights through force and have long called for a negotiated solution; however, Turkey has repeatedly blocked peaceful and legal routes to Kurdish recognition. But this is of little weight in international politics. Turkey is a NATO member, and a major trading partner, and is keeping refugees out of Europe.

When the designation of the PKK was put to the test in a Belgian court, the court rejected the terrorist label, finding, instead, that the PKK should be considered a non-state actor engaged in a war. But this hasn't stopped governments from keeping the PKK on their terrorist lists.

In another court case, the PKK has challenged its inclusion in the European Union's terrorist list. This case was filed in Luxembourg in 2014, and in November 2018 a decision was made in favour of the PKK. However, the EU appealed, and, meanwhile, a technicality allowed the PKK to be kept on the list via a new application. This week, the appeal verdict was announced, and the case was referred back to the lower court on the grounds that the arguments used had been insufficient. The PKK lawyers are far from giving up hope,

though. They point out that the 2018 case had only reviewed one of their seven arguments. Not only do they have plenty more arguments – they are looking forward to the opportunity to get those arguments aired.

Meanwhile, the US State Department has renewed its call for the arrest of three leading PKK cadres and its offer of millions of dollars for information as to their whereabouts. Responding to this, the Kurdistan Communities Union (the umbrella organisation that includes the PKK) has observed that the US has effectively become an accomplice in Turkey's attacks against the Kurds and has looked on "as Turkey has assumed the sponsorship of all global jihadist proxy forces". They observe that, "Without our leader Abdullah Öcalan, our three leading executives, and the thousands of PKK martyrs, IS would have never been defeated. In the absence of their philosophy and struggle, IS would have survived as a political reality of the Middle East, and the USA would have conceded to hold negotiations with it, hosted by Turkey, as it did in the case of the Taliban." This is hardly the image of the US as defenders against obscurantist jihadism that the US government likes to portray.

US policy towards the PKK isn't just about appeasing Turkey. They have no sympathy with an organisation that consistently criticises capitalism and supports a socialist alternative. In Syria, where tactical considerations have cast them alongside the Syrian Democratic Forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which also follows the philosophy of imprisoned PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, the US is trying to nurture liberal capitalist values and bring much more conservative Kurdish groups into the political structures of the Administration. The defenders of the "free world" have not shown themselves especially keen on radical democracy.

In Iraq, US support for Turkey and antipathy towards anything connected with the PKK has translated into promotion and sponsoring of the Sinjar (or Şengal) Agreement. This is portrayed as making Şengal safe for its Yazidi inhabitants, but actually deprives them of the autonomy that the PKK helped them build up, handing over control to the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The Yazidis have been resisting this, and the stand-off continues. The US Religious Freedom report, quoted above, regards the US-brokered deal as a positive development, but, at the same time, the

report notes that the agreement was “widely criticized for failing to address concerns of the Yazidis”, and it calls for their “full inclusion”. Full inclusion doesn’t seem compatible with an agreement that puts the Yazidis under the control of others.

While the report’s commissioner for the region, Nadine Maenza, appears sincere in her approach – as well as in her much-appreciated support for the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria – these conflicting conclusions are the result of America’s hypocritical foreign policy. The report also criticises Turkish airstrikes on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq for “disproportionately impact[ing] already devastated religious and ethnic minority communities”, and notes that “The Turkish military has reportedly taken minimal precautions to avoid civilian casualties in the area”. However, the US has been fully supportive of these military incursions into Iraq in pursuit of PKK guerrilla forces.

Turkey’s growing presence in Iraq has been made possible by another big hypocrisy. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, champions Kurdish independence, but the deals it has made in the course of Kurdistan’s internal power struggles have turned it into a tool of the Turkish government. At the same time, endemic corruption has destroyed the economy, and, instead of addressing fundamental problems, the Kurdistan Regional Government has attacked protestors and journalists. When, on Kurdish Journalism Day, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani tweeted his “warmest congratulations to journalists across Kurdistan” and his “support to a free press”, he was promptly reminded of the journalists whose critical reporting about his government had been rewarded with prison sentences.

In northern Syria, the power struggles of unending war promote new hypocrisies, especially around ceasefires. Turkey has never fully complied with its Russian-brokered ceasefire with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), while Russia is content to allow them to continue to harass SDF-controlled areas in the hope of weakening the Autonomous Administration. And, this week, fighting flared up again in Qamişli between a militia loyal to the Syrian regime, and the Autonomous Administration’s internal security forces, or

Asayiş, after the militia attacked a check point on Tuesday night, killing an Asayiş member. Salih Muslim, from the Autonomous Administration's Democratic Union Party (PYD), has described what is happening as a game played by Russia and Damascus aimed at spreading chaos and destabilising the region.

In Turkey, the politicised justice system gives plenty of scope for hypocrisy, especially when combined with an elastic definition of terrorism. The war against terror has proved an endless source of justification for unjustifiable actions everywhere. For the Turkish government, it provides justification for bringing down the law on all their critics, and especially on the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which they refuse to distinguish from the PKK even though the HDP has always acted according to the law and within the political system. This Monday will see the opening of a major show trial in which 108 leading members of the HDP face the possibility of life imprisonment. This case (which I have looked at in detail [here](#)) is also the basis for a government attempt to ban the party completely.

In 2014, when the Kurdish city of Kobanê, across the border in Syria, was under siege from as-yet-undefeated ISIS fighters, the 108 members of the HDP's Central Executive Board agreed to send out a tweet calling people to join demonstrations in support of the beleaguered city. That call for people to exercise their democratic right to protest in support of their Kurdish brothers and sisters and against one of the most brutal forces the world has seen, forms the basis of the charges against the HDP members. The Turkish government was preventing people crossing the border to help in Kobanê's defence, and when the protestors came onto the streets they were attacked by the police and by counter protestors – far-right Islamists and Turkish nationalists. In the ensuing violence, tens of people were killed, mainly supporters of the HDP. Now the HDP's Executive Board members are being accused of the homicide of those who died, and also of disrupting the unity and integrity of the state.

Turkey claims to be a democracy, but for this basic exercise of democratic rights, the third largest party in the Turkish parliament faces the imprisonment of even more politicians and executives, disruption of its ability to function,

and possible closure, while its leading members are portrayed as murderers of their own supporters and terrorists, and are threatened with the most extreme punishment. You can't get much more hypocritical than that.