

From targeted assassinations to scorched earth – a weekly news review

Turkey carries out targeted assassinations and promotes the revival of ISIS. In Russian-sponsored talks, the misrepresentation of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria allows regional powers to bond over calls for its destruction. Turkey's citizens face a bleak economic future. Disputes over oil exports and party rivalry impact the Kurdistan Regional Government's autonomy. And Iran's war against the Kurds sees intra-opposition violence and a government scorched earth policy. Sarah Glynn looks at another busy week of Kurdish politics.

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Sarah Glynn

On Tuesday, a member of NATO and of the Council of Europe carried out a targeted assassination of local political leaders in a neighbouring state, as they were carrying out their public duties. The murderer was Turkey, the people killed were in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

– and the world took no notice. The United States issued one of their [less than useless statements](#) urging “all parties to deescalate”, as though there was some equivalence between being a council leader and murdering one. When Turkey breaches international mores, no one wants to know, especially if the victims hold few cards in the world of Realpolitik.

Tuesday’s attack [brings to 48](#) the number of people in North and East Syria killed by Turkish drones since the beginning of this year; and a further 38 have been wounded. Thirteen of those killed were civilians. The rest were soldiers who had defended their land and the world against ISIS. None were a threat to Turkey.

Civilian leaders have been specifically targeted. This week’s drone hit a car carrying leaders of Qamişlo Canton administration on a visit to local councils. It killed the female co-chair of Qamişlo Canton Council, Yusra Derwêş, the female deputy co-chair, Liman Şiwêş, and their driver, Firat Tûma. The other canton co-chair, Gabî Şemûn, was injured but is now out of hospital. The two women are both Kurdish, while the men are Syriac Christians, typifying the multi-ethnic nature of the Autonomous Administration’s structures.

Turkey began to carry out drone assassinations in June 2020, with the murder of three members of the Kongra Star women’s organisation who were meeting in a house near Kobanê. A year ago, the co-chair of the Autonomous Administration’s Executive Council was murdered by a drone attack on his car, and the co-chairs of the Justice and Reform office were killed in a similar attack in September.

The drone attacks have been accompanied by constant bombardments. These don’t register in international news media, but they contribute to a war of attrition that is designed to prevent the Autonomous Administration from building a stable society, to destroy its popular support, and to drive the local population away from the border areas. Although these attacks are all in breach of the ceasefire agreements signed by Turkey after their 2019 invasion into Syria, the United States and Russia – the guarantors of those agreements – have done nothing to stop them.

The destabilising impact of the attacks is increased by the sustenance this gives to ISIS. ISIS still maintains a network of cells in the region, and – as captured ISIS fighters confirm – receives support from Turkey and from the Turkish occupied areas. Lack of stability and of possibilities for a secure livelihood create the conditions on which ISIS thrives.

A further indication of Turkey's relationship with ISIS was provided in a [report](#) this week from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. This claimed that 37 ISIS prisoners had escaped from a prison in Turkish-occupied Serê Kaniyê with the help of Turkish-backed militants, who then took them into the area run by the Autonomous Administration. Eighteen have been caught, but the others are now contributing to the threats on the region.

There has been an increase both of bombardments and of drone attacks since the beginning of last week and the announcement by the Administration that they would stop waiting for the world to act and would carry out trials of ISIS prisoners themselves. Organising such trials becomes even more difficult under the threat of attack, and there has been speculation that the increase in attacks is a response to the announcement of trials that would put a spotlight on Turkey's role in the growth and support of ISIS.

The increase in attacks has also coincided with the latest round of talks on the future of Syria between Russia, Turkey, Iran and the Syrian regime. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's diplomacy is often accompanied by threats, and exemplifies Clausewitz's dictum that "war is a mere continuation of politics with other means".

Astana

The deputy foreign ministers of Russia, Turkey, Iran and Syria met in the Kazakhstan capital of Astana over 20th and 21st June. This was the twentieth such meeting between representatives of the four states, and [its agreed final statement](#) is almost word for word the same as [that put out after the nineteenth meeting](#) last November. Most of the text gets just minor tweaks. As before, common cause is found in an extensive attack on the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which receives added accusations of

restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly; there are new references to the earthquake and earthquake relief; and an additional paragraph talks about the “constructive spirit” of the discussions. The United Nations’ Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, was there as an observer, but the UN has also allowed no place for representatives from North and East Syria in discussions about Syria’s future.

As before, the Syrian representative [insisted](#) that any progress towards normalisation of relations between Syria and Turkey will be dependent on Turkish withdrawal from the Syrian territories it occupies. This is not mentioned in the statement, which is a document issued by the other three countries – the so-called guarantor countries.

The Autonomous Administration has [expressed their frustration](#) at Russian attempts to portray them as promoting separatism from Syria and at Russia’s claim that Washington has prevented the Administration from talking with Damascus. Separatism should not be taboo, but it isn’t what they are demanding, as Russia must be well aware. The Administration has a clear and public programme for a peaceful solution for the whole of Syria, and they also stress that they are not subject to others in what they can discuss. Foreign relations co-chair, Bedran Çiya Kurd, [denounced](#) the process as political deals made at the expense of the people of Syria, which misrepresent the Autonomous Administration – and not Turkey – as a threat to Syria, and which promote division and confrontation rather than dialogue and consensus.

Turkey

Other countries may evince little concern over Turkish state murder or attempts to destabilise North and East Syria, but the Turkish economy – and its potential for foreign investment – is the subject of much international interest. As the leaders of international finance demanded, Erdoğan has abandoned his promise never to adopt the mainstream economic orthodoxy of raising interest rates in order to bring down inflation. On Thursday, under his new financial team, the Central Bank increased its interest rates from 8.5

to 15 %, though even this massive increase [failed to impress](#) foreign observers, who had expected more, and were not convinced of Erdoğan's commitment to the change of line.

The long period of low interest rates encouraged people to borrow, creating a nation of debtors and putting more money into the system, so increasing inflation. Runaway inflation that far outstripped wages has left very many people struggling to survive.

But increasing interest rates [will also make life difficult](#) for those not already well off. It will push individuals and companies into bankruptcy and cause the economy to contract until it reaches a new equilibrium at a lower level. Businesses will try and survive by cutting wages and imposing harsher working conditions. The mainstream economic model calls for governments to respond with cuts to public services, while the inevitable protests are increasingly met with repressive policing.

For the large number of people living on the poverty line, neither of these scenarios brings much hope. Capitalism has little to offer them – although the worst can be mitigated somewhat by government intervention.

Erdoğan's main concern will be to stave off the worst economic woes until after the local elections, which are due to take place next March.

With an eye on those elections, Erdoğan is still [employing](#) a dangerous populism, dismissing the opposition as "pro-LGBT" and "affiliated with terrorists". Meanwhile Fatih Erbakan, the leader of the New Welfare Party, who was elected to parliament on the list of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), has [claimed](#) that teaching the theory of evolution turns students into either PKK members or communists. And journalist Sinan Aygül was [violently beaten](#) by the security officer of the AKP mayor whose corruption he exposed. (The attack was caught on CCTV compelling the authorities to act.)

In a piece of not so bad news, the Constitutional Court has [ruled](#) that there is no legal case to support freezing the state funding of the People's Democratic

Party (HDP) while the case for the closure of the party goes through the courts. Perhaps such blatant manipulation was not thought necessary – especially as any HDP mayors elected in the local elections can expect to be dismissed from their elected positions, like their predecessors.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

On the day that Turkey assassinated two Kurdish women leaders in Qamişlo, and that they took part in talks in Astana in which they tried to base Syria's future around destruction of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was in Ankara. None of these events appear to trouble Masrour Barzani or his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). He was in Ankara to meet Erdoğan and the new Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, the former head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation who is responsible for many drone assassinations. After the meeting, Barzani [tweeted](#), "Pleased to meet with President @RTErdogan in Ankara today and congratulate him on his re-election. We discussed advancing bilateral relations between the Kurdistan Region and Türkiye and the latest developments in Iraq and the region." As the KDP-linked Kurdistan 24 [observed](#), "Turkey and the Kurdistan Region share close economic and political ties. Thousands of Turkish companies in various sectors operate in the Kurdistan Region."

No doubt Barzani also discussed the future of the region's stalled oil exports, which used to be directed through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Ever since the court of the International Chamber of Commerce in Paris ruled, in March, that the oil export agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Turkey breached a 1973 agreement by excluding the Federal Government of Iraq, the lucrative exports have stopped flowing. The KRG has already lost [over \\$2 billion](#) of expected revenue. The case was launched by Iraq back in 2014, and the court instructed Turkey to pay Iraq around \$1.5 billion in damages. Turkey received the oil on very favourable terms, but they know that oil exports are of vital importance to the KRG and Iraq, and they are taking the opportunity to drive a hard bargain. Before reopening the pipeline, they are [demanding](#) that Iraq issue a pardon and drop their compensation claim,

that they give assurances to Turkish firms, and that Turkey becomes directly involved as a third partner in the KRG's oil industry. This is forcing Iraq to investigate other possible export routes that avoid Turkey – through Basra and the Persian Gulf, or through the Syrian Mediterranean port of Banyas.

Control over oil revenues has been the subject of ongoing disputes between the Kurdistan Region and the Federal Government, and is at the centre of Iraq's new three-year budget, which was finally agreed by the Iraqi Parliament on 12 June and ratified by the president on Wednesday. The ICC decision weakened the KRG's bargaining power, and the debates were also overshadowed by the visceral tensions between the two main parties in the Kurdistan Region – the dominant KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

The budget, which is heavily dependent on oil exports, allows the KRG a significantly smaller share of the overall revenues than in the past, and puts the KRG's oil revenues under Iraqi scrutiny. On the PUK's insistence, the budget states that the region's revenues must be distributed equally to all its provinces, and Bagdad can be called to intervene if this does not happen.

Kurdistan Watch [concludes](#) that "the recent Iraqi budget serves as a testament to the ongoing erosion of the KRG's influence and the divergent interests of the region's two primary parties, the KDP and PUK."

Iran

Iraq and the KRG are also under pressure from Iran to expel or disarm the parties from Rojhilat (East or Iranian Kurdistan) that have their bases in the Kurdistan Region, and an Iranian delegation has [come](#) to monitor progress.

In this difficult situation, where Iranian opposition forces need to show a united front, two factions of the Kurdish leftist Komala party have fallen out so [acrimoniously](#) that two men were killed in the fighting and others were wounded. The faction led by Omar Elkhanizadeh split from the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, headed by Abdullah Mohtadi, in 2007; but in November, after prolonged negotiations, the factions reunited. However, on Wednesday

they announced that their attempted unity had failed, and on Thursday the tensions led to violence. Offers of mediation have come from many other Kurdish groups, who point out that this infighting can only help the Iranian regime. (These sparring Komala parties are both different from Komala – Kurdistan Organisation of the Communist Party of Iran, led by Ebrahim Alizadeh, from which Mohtadi's party split in 2000, and which has subsequently split again.)

In Iran itself, the regime has [continued its assault](#) on the mountain area where the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) has its bases. PJAK have said that they have been maintaining a ceasefire and only fighting in self-defence when attacked, but that hasn't stopped the Iranian state from trying to increase military control. A major operation begun on 12 June is still going on. Like the Turkish army in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and parts of south-east Turkey, the Iranian military is destroying the natural environment and driving away local villagers in order to establish military bases and roads. Herders can't take their animals to their summer pastures, and beekeepers can't reach their hives. Forests are burnt to deprive the guerrillas of cover. In the words attributed by Tacitus to the Scottish chieftain, Calgacus, "They make a desert and call it peace."