

Racist by definition – a weekly news review

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As Turkey continues to act as though following a handbook of fascism, it becomes ever more difficult to be a Kurd. The recent attacks on the offices of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have been followed by a series of bloody assaults against Kurdish citizens that demonstrate the poisonous impact of the government's relentless anti-Kurd rhetoric. Fascism, as Umberto Eco noted, "is racist by definition". Eco writes about "obsession with a plot", which "must also come from the inside". For the fascists of twentieth-century Europe, the target was the Jews; for Turkey it is the Kurds.

On Monday, two young Kurds, who had come to the western province of Afyon to work in the harvest, queued up at the barber for a shave. After they had waited two hours while others were brought in in front of them, they complained – only to be told "you are terrorists, you speak Kurdish". One of

the men was then forced into the forest, where he was threatened with death and filmed being attacked and having his arm broken. The men called their family to help, but when their relations got to the barber's shop they were attacked with sticks, and seven people, including two women, were injured. This incident followed three or four days of racist abuse, and, after the attack, police came to the town where the families were staying and told them they were not wanted there and that they must pack their things immediately and go back to their hometowns.

On Tuesday, the festival of Eid al-Adha, an argument broke out at the animal sacrifice site in the Altındağ district of Ankara, and this became an excuse for an armed attack on a Kurdish family from Mardin, in which four men were injured, two of them seriously. Another family member reported that the attackers numbered over 150 and were led by four people with guns, who rained fire on the Kurds. He commented that "They were full of hatred. It wouldn't be enough for them to kill all Kurds". And he also said that it was the aggressor family that was given official protection, while relatives of the victims were attacked by police when they refused to leave the front of the hospital where they were waiting for the injured. Another man reported that the Kurdish family was prevented by gendarmes from returning to their village.

On Wednesday, in the Konya district of central Anatolia, another argument, between shepherds, was used as an excuse for a mass attack against a Kurdish family. This time, a 43-year-old man, Hakim Dal, was shot dead. The dead man's brother claims that the attackers numbered over sixty, and another witness told journalists that there had been at least three previous attempted attacks against this family, and that "The instigator is the mukhtar [village head]. He was provoking villagers against the family." The same group was responsible for a violent attack on 12 May against a Kurdish family of seven from Kars, when they raided their home with knives, sticks and stones, announcing "We are Grey Wolves, we won't let you live here". (The Grey Wolves is the militant wing of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).) Although ten people were detained after that earlier attack, all but two have been released and, as in the incident described above, protection orders

have been made, not for the victims of the attack, but for some of the attackers.

In each case it was clear which side the authorities were on. The state has not only promoted anti-Kurdish violence through its rhetoric, it has also shown that it will protect the people who carry it out. The victims here were not political. They were attacked simply for being Kurds.

For political Kurds, the state will get involved directly, as they made clear in their response to those commemorating the sixth anniversary of the bomb attack in Suruç that killed 33 young people and injured over a hundred more. On 20 July 2015, the Federation of Socialist Youth Associations held a press conference for 300 volunteers who had gathered to bring practical help and children's toys for the rebuilding of Kobanê. Photographs show their smiling faces before an ISIS suicide bomber brought an end to their dreams. It is widely believed that this and the other ISIS bomb attacks of that time were facilitated by the Turkish state, and the commemorations repeated the unanswered call for an investigation into what happened.

Police attacked Tuesday's commemoration events in Ankara, İzmir, and Istanbul, and sixty demonstrators were detained overnight. The police used pepper spray and plastic bullets. They sprayed inside buildings where people had taken refuge and inside a police van full of detainees, and several journalists were injured by police shields and plastic bullets. This is just the latest clampdown on those demanding justice. The mother of one of the young men who died in the massacre is serving a seven-year prison sentence for the speech she gave at her son's funeral.

Further reminders of Turkey's deepening reliance on fascism under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were provided by the latest figures for the number of people prosecuted for "insulting the president", and by plans for even greater control over the media. From the introduction of the presidency system, in 2018, up to the end of 2020, there were over 29,000 prosecutions. The 2020 figure was lower than that for the previous year, but this could be the result of self-censorship rather than reflecting any softening by the authorities. It included 84 children between 12 and 15, and a further 206 who were under eighteen. Of

last year's prosecutions, around a third were sentenced and a further third had their decisions deferred.

In a news conference on Wednesday, at the end of his controversial visit to Cyprus, Erdoğan announced plans to regulate media outlets that receive foreign funding. As al-Monitor explains, this has to be seen in a context where the government has cut off other sources of funding for independent media, including effectively operating an advertising embargo. And it can also be seen as a response to reports of people's growing reliance on independent media outlets.

Meanwhile, more information has come out revealing Turkish attempts to persecute dissidents even after they have fled the country. News editor, Celal Başlangıç, announced on Tuesday that German police had warned him that his name was on a hit list of 55 people critical of Erdoğan's rule. This follows on from a shorter list that was published on a social media account whose name references both Turkey's shadowy gendarmerie intelligence agency and the Grey Wolves. It coincides with a further threat against exiled journalist, Erk Acarer, who was attacked in the courtyard of his home in Berlin on 7 July.

Erdoğan's is a clerical fascism, and those who have chronicled Turkey's support for violent Islamists in Syria should not be surprised by his comment, with respect to the Taliban, that "Turkey has nothing that contradicts their beliefs". He was speaking about plans for Turkey to continue to run Afghanistan's international airport after the US withdrawal, and he also outlined what support they would demand from the US. The Taliban oppose the plan – they want to control the airport themselves – but they responded to Erdoğan's claim with their own observation that "Turkey is our brother; we share many common points based on belief".

Clearly, the ISIS captives in camps such as al-Hol and in Rojava's prisons have no hesitation in seeing Turkey as sharing their beliefs. Journalist and commentator, Hiwa Osman, observes that every journalist or human rights worker who speaks to them, is told in the second or third sentence, "one day we will be free because Erdoğan is going to invade and to free us all."

While Erdoğan was in Cyprus, his Interior Minister, Suleyman Soylu, spent Eid in occupied Afrîn. A visit from the Interior Minister is a clear statement of the Turkish government's intent to make this a permanent part of the Turkish state.

Erdoğan has just announced the completion of the first 50,000 of a planned 100,000 homes for 'Syrian refugees' in the areas that Turkey has occupied. These form part of his project – backed financially by Qatar and Kuwait – to enforce demographic change and to replace the population with non-Kurds and with people supportive of Turkey.

A glimpse into the horror of Turkish-occupied Afrîn was provided on Thursday by a long article in al-Monitor. For those who have been following reports from the region, the accounts of extreme violence and abuse of women will be sadly familiar. Curiously, the article barely mentions religion, although ideas of jihad are exploited both to attract fighters and to justify the misogynistic social structures. But what it does emphasise, and illustrates with numerous examples, is the material "unfettered greed" that drives the criminal gangs that lord over the area under Turkish protection, and how these "criminal syndicates" are linked to the drug trade and invest in businesses in Turkey. Before Turkey's invasion, Afrîn had become known for peace and democracy.

The official video of Erdoğan's Eid greeting has been going viral and setting tongues wagging. It shows him clearly drifting asleep for a brief second, leading to speculation as to both his state of health, and the relationship with those who work with him that would allow this pre-recorded video to go out unedited.

Not that removal of Erdoğan would solve all difficulties, especially for the Kurds. In fact, outwith the HDP, ethnic nationalism unites the different political parties. And the latest announcements from the mainstream Republican People's Party (CHP) should worry anyone looking for a more humane society. CHP President, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, has promised that getting rid of the refugees would be one of his top five government priorities: "we will say goodbye to our Syrian guests and send them off to their country in two years". Turkey hosts more refugees than anywhere else in the world, but, realistically,

he has little chance of negotiating for the EU to bear their share of 'the burden' as he puts it; so this rhetoric is doubly dangerous. It seems to legitimise both popular resentment against the refugees, and also Erdoğan's settlements in ethnically-cleansed Syria.

Meanwhile, in another manifestation of the EU's outsourcing of migration control, a new movement of refugees escaping the Taliban's take-over of Afghanistan is being illegally pushed back from the Turkish border into Iran, where the refugees risk being shot by Iranian border police. Of course the long-term solution for the refugees is to bring an end to the war and persecution they have escaped from. While those who support the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria are trying to do just that, Erdoğan's foreign policy only creates more instability and more refugees.

The EU may be unlikely to shift on refugees, but this week has seen a few ripples in the otherwise glacial waters of international relations. The United Nations and UNICEF published a statement calling for an end to the repeated disruptions at the Alouk water pumping station, which are putting up to a million people in al-Hasakah at risk. Although this produced an angry response from Turkey, who is responsible for the situation, the report doesn't actually mention Turkey by name and merely ends with a toothless appeal to "all parties" to protect civilian infrastructure. And, meanwhile, in the North Aleppo countryside, where the population is boosted by IDPs from Afrîn, 38 villages are no longer receiving UNICEF's vital deliveries to their water tanks because the international organisation has run out of funds.

On Sunday evening, the ninth anniversary of the founding of Rojava was marked by a Twitter storm calling for the international recognition of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Recognition could give the region a seat at the table that discusses Syria's future, and could allow international aid to be brought in without relying on the unlikely good will of Damascus. Despite relying on the Kurds and their neighbours to sacrifice thousands of people in the fight against ISIS, the US never made a commitment to help get them this essential diplomatic support. Of course, Twitter campaigns, like other demonstrations – for that is essentially what

they are – would soon be forgotten without further action, and there was further action. On Monday, a motion was brought to the Catalan Parliament to recognise the existence of the Autonomous Administration and to help with its reconstruction. This has cross party support and is expected to be approved, and, although Catalonia has no legal say over foreign policy, it should provide a positive precedent. Also on Monday, a delegation from North and East Syria had a meeting with President Macron in Paris, where international recognition was on the agenda.

And finally, it was announced on Wednesday that the HDP's imprisoned former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, will be awarded the Weimar Human Rights Award.

Yesterday was the 98th anniversary of the Treaty of Lausanne, which agreed Middle Eastern borders. Turkey wants to overthrow the treaty because it didn't give the Turkish republic as much of the former Ottoman Empire as they would like to control. Kurds blame the treaty for allowing them nothing.