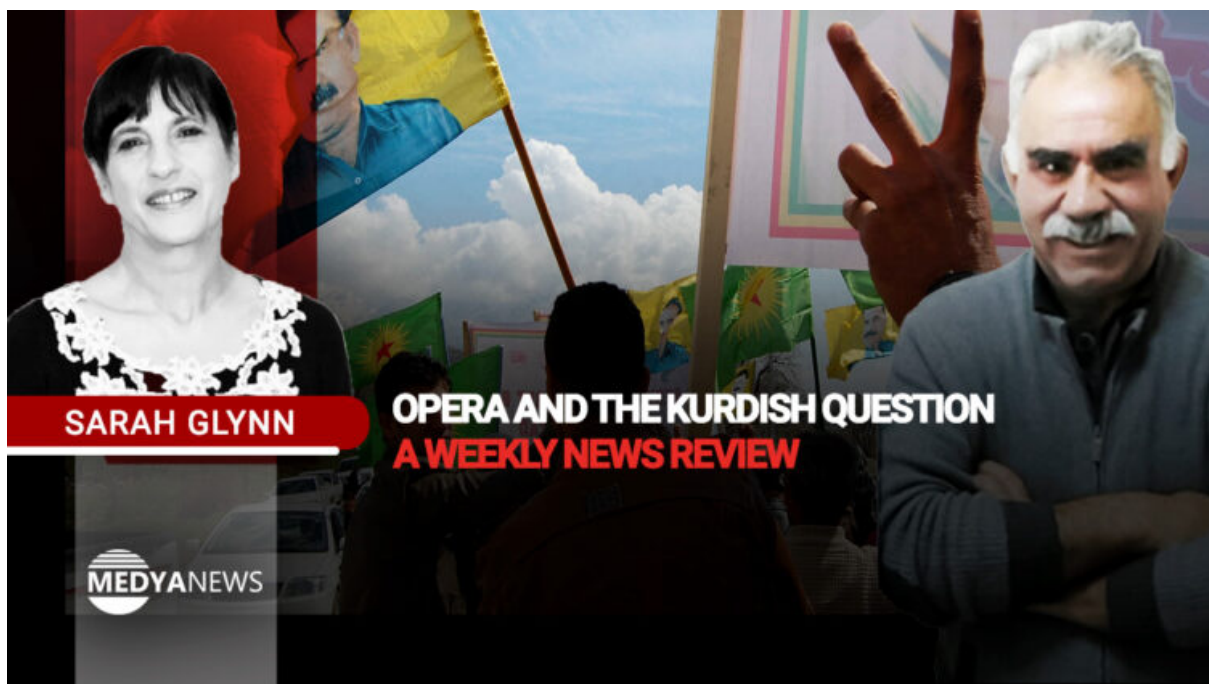


# Opera and the Kurdish Question – a weekly news review

Attempts by the new leader of the CHP to build bridges with Kurdish voters demonstrate the huge gulf still to be crossed by Turkish politics; while recent news provides many examples of the deliberate erosion of Kurdish lives and culture by the Turkish state. This week's review also looks at the role of Hûda Par, attacks on North and East Syria, Germany's thirty-year ban on the PKK, and the campaign for Öcalan's freedom.

[11:48 am 25/11/2023](#)



Last Sunday, an illustrious crowd attended the opera house in Istanbul's Kadıköy to hear the soprano, Pervin Chakar. One of the many politicians in the audience was the newly elected leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Özgür Özel, who took advantage of his privileged status to [show public respect](#) for the singer. He joined her on stage and kissed her hand, and posted the image on Twitter with the comment "Miss Chakar's message of peace, brotherhood, and sharing our pain of the earthquake were as impressive as her performance." All of which might seem unremarkable, but this is Turkey, and Pervin Chakar is proudly Kurdish, with Kurdish songs included in her repertoire. Pro-government media immediately accused Özel of supporting Chakar's political views, quoting her earlier comments about the need for a Kurdish state.

Özel is trying to rescue Kurdish votes for his party after the betrayal of the secret pact made by its former leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, and the leader of the far-right Victory Party, before the second round of last May's presidential election. (The full details of this pact were [published](#) on Thursday.) However, Turkey's century of anti-Kurdish nationalism makes Kurdish reconciliation a difficult task for a political leader who doesn't want to alienate their party's existing support. At the party congress where he was elected, Özel, like Kılıçdaroğlu, sent greetings to Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), whose imprisonment has been condemned by the European Court of Human Rights. When President Erdoğan, who has promised never to release Demirtaş, chided Özel for this greeting, Özel looked over his shoulder at his nationalist supporters, and crushed any hopes that, when it came to the Kurdish Question, his promise of change was more than mere rhetoric.

He [responded](#) that criticising Demirtaş' imprisonment was "much, much more justifiable" than "seeking help from Abdullah Öcalan", later adding – with reference to the aborted 2013-15 peace negotiations – that Erdoğan was "a pen pal with Abdullah Öcalan, the murderer of 40,000 people".

It is Öcalan, not Demirtaş, who is recognised as leader by millions of Kurds, and so holds the key to a future peace deal, and Demirtaş is very wary of attempts to portray him as competing for Öcalan's authority. The much-

quoted figure of 40,000 deaths includes everyone killed in the fight for Kurdish freedom, the majority of whom were killed by the state. The spokesperson for HEDEP – the current incarnation of the HDP – [observed](#), “Your good Kurds, bad Kurds games have been tried many times before.” And she asked, “Before saying anything about Mr Öcalan, who has been kept in isolation for years without observing any legal norms, have you moved for his fundamental legal rights?”

It is a sad fact that the CHP has inherited a huge inbuilt resistance to questioning the Turkish nationalism of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of their party and of the Turkish Republic. Erdoğan has also tied his standard firmly to the nationalist mast – religious nationalist in his case – but the optimism of the peace process period shows that anti-Kurdish nationalism need not be the only option for Turkish politicians.

### **Anti-Kurdology**

For now, though, oppression of the Kurds and of Kurdish culture has become a central tenet of Turkish policy both within and outwith Turkey’s borders. At a [recent event in Istanbul](#), speakers argued that state-sponsored attempts to prove that Kurds and Kurdish culture do not exist have created a new discipline of anti-Kurdology.

Of course, Kurdish culture does exist, but when people try and express it publicly, they are forever running into problems. Two weeks ago, Cizîr Culture and Art Festival had its concert [banned](#) with baseless excuses about venues, and then lost its children’s art workshop, which the authorities [replaced](#) with a children’s programme of their own at the same time and place.

### **Lives unvalued**

The state’s dismissal of Kurdish lives is exemplified by the fate of 12-year-old Uğur Kaymaz, who, along with his father, Ahmet, was shot dead by the police 19 years ago this week. Thirteen bullets were found in his small body. The Kaymaz family [lived](#) in the town of Kızıltepe in Mardin, where they had moved after their village was forcibly evacuated, and the father worked fulltime as a

truck driver. Following the shootings, the provincial governor announced that “two terrorists have been captured dead following a clash,” but the only witnesses were the police themselves, and the [evidence was riddled with contradictions](#). The Kalashnikovs that they claimed to have found next to the bodies were never searched for fingerprints. The European Court of Human Rights [ruled](#), in 2014, that the police operation was not carried out so as to reduce risk, that it was not established that deadly force was necessary, and that the subsequent police investigation into the deaths was inadequate; however, the Turkish courts ignored the European court’s decision and [refused to retry the police officers](#), who had been acquitted on grounds of self-defence. There has still been no proper investigation into what happened, and no one has been brought to account.

When the elected mayor of the district was replaced by a government appointed trustee, the statue put up in memory of the murdered child was removed, and the park named after him was renamed. On the twelfth anniversary of his death, his mother was dismissed from her job as a municipal janitor. The week before the death anniversary commemoration, which was organised by HEDEP along with the Kaymaz family, the gravestones were [vandalised](#) twice. They had been broken before a previous anniversary too.

Turkish authorities also practice low level but persistent harassment. Kurdish football supporters are [repeatedly arrested](#) for not standing up for the national anthem, even though it is now known that courts will rule that this is considered only as disrespect, which, unlike denigration of the national anthem, is not illegal.

### **Kurdish politicians and activists**

Any Kurd who defends Kurdish rights is called a terrorist, even in parliament where HEDEP Group Deputy Chair, Meral Daniş Beştaş, recently [retaliated](#) by throwing the terrorism accusation back at her accuser. In October, the Deputy Speaker of the Turkish parliament, who is a member of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), swore at a member of HEDEP, forgetting

that his microphone was on. He refused to apologise, and when he was in the Speaker's chair again this week, HEDEP MPs [protested](#), disrupting the sitting with claps and chants, and occupying the rostrum.

HEDEP MPs have been backing up their speeches with placards that spell out key issues, as they try to get genuine opposition views heard, but the government and its tame judiciary are determined to make their work difficult. Beştaş and two other MPs – one from HEDEP and one from the CHP – are the subjects of a new [request for the lifting of parliamentary immunity](#): the first step necessary for a potential arrest. And the Chief Public Prosecutor's Office of the Supreme Court of Appeals has [refused to accept](#) HEDEP as the registered abbreviation of the party name, arguing that it is too similar to that used by an earlier Kurdish party, HADEP, that was banned in 2003.

Leading members of the HDP/HEDEP continue to face trial in the Kobanê case, which could see some imprisoned for life without parole. This case is a litany of bad practice. Among the recent violations, a witness statement was [expanded](#) from seven lines to two pages with the help of the prosecutor's office.

In another political case, against members of the People's Democratic Congress, an anonymous witness [confessed](#) that he did not know any of the defendants.

This week, eight socialist activists were [detained](#) in Diyarbakir and Bursa, including the Deputy Co-Chair of the Socialist Party of the Oppressed (ESP). Their lawyers report that they have gone on hunger strike.

In a better piece of news, the Saturday Mothers are now [being left to hold](#) their weekly Istanbul vigil unmolested by the authorities. That this is a positive step shows how bad things have become. The vigil is for people who seek news of family members who were disappeared by the state, mainly in the eighties and nineties. There is no indication that the Mothers and other relatives will be able to get any closer to finding out what happened to those they have lost.

## **Constitutional crisis**

Meanwhile, the constitutional crisis intensifies. This was triggered by the Court of Cassation's refusal to accept the Constitutional Court's binding ruling on the illegality of keeping Can Atalay in prison after he was elected as an MP for the Turkish Workers' Party, TİP. The CHP is staging a sit-in protest in the parliament, and a criminal complaint about the Cassation Court has been [submitted](#), with signatures of over 3,000 lawyers.

Erdoğan has used the situation as an [opportunity to press for a new constitution](#). He has also raised the possibility of replacing the requirement for the president to be elected on a vote of [50% plus one](#), with an election based on a simple majority that would not go into a second round. This change of electoral system does not have the support of his coalition partners in the MHP. For HEDEP, what is needed is thorough democratic change. Most people agree that the constitution needs to be rewritten, but many don't trust Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) to do this.

## **Kurdish Hizbullah**

As well as oppressing the Kurds, the Turkish state attempts to divide them and lure them away from radical politics through sponsoring the Kurdish Hizbullah. This right-wing Islamist organisation – which has no relationship to the Lebanese Hezbollah – was responsible for large numbers of killings and disappearances of government opponents in the 1990s, and was behind much of the violence at the Kobanê protests that has been blamed on the HDP. In 2012, they formed a political party, Hûda Par. They pay lip-service to Kurdish nationalism, but this does not stop them working with the Turkish ultra-nationalists of the MHP. They won four seats at the last general election through joining the AKP list.

As Amed Dicle [observes](#) for Medya News, Öcalan argued back in 2007 that the Turkish state was trying to use Hizbullah to undermine the PKK in the same way that Israel supported Hamas to undermine the PLO. Now, Hûda Par is attempting to use public support for Palestine and for Hamas as a vehicle for building their own strength. They have organised mass rallies with men

and boys dressed up as members of Hamas's al-Qassam Brigades, and they are believed to have been responsible for a giant poster of Abu Ubeyde, the Brigades' spokesman, that was hung on the historic walls of Diyarbakir Fort.

## **Erdoğan and Israel**

Erdoğan has also found in Palestine an opportunity to boost his own support, but, despite all the bravura about backing Hamas, Turkey continues to allow Azerbaijan to send oil to Israel through the Turkish port of Ceyhan. The AKP and allied MHP [voted down](#) a proposal from the small Felicity Party that parliament investigate goods being sent from Turkey to Israel and their impact on the situation in Gaza.

## **Syria**

Across the border in Syria, Turkey continues their attacks in an attempt to make the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria unviable. News reports from North Press Agency record that on Monday they shelled a village near Manbij, leaving seven civilians injured. On Wednesday, three Turkish drone attacks in Qamishlo district left two people dead and five injured. On Thursday, a man was injured when Turkey bombed his village in Ain Issa; and a [drone attack](#) on a car in Amude district killed a North Press Agency reporter and injured his sister and her husband. Yesterday, olive pickers near Manbij were targeted by a drone and one was wounded; a village was bombed in Al Shahba; and a car was targeted in Manbij, with reports of casualties.

At the same time, in northern Iraq, Turkey was again accused of using chemical weapons against the PKK guerrillas.

Turkey isn't the only hostile force in Syria. President Assad's Syrian government also wants to weaken the Autonomous Administration, as do Assad's Iranian allies. The autonomous Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh are separate from the main autonomous area, and everything brought into them has to pass through land controlled by the Syrian Government. This week, Syrian Government forces [tightened their siege](#) around the two neighbourhoods.



Since Israel's attack on Gaza, which has been supported by the United States, Iranian-backed militias have targeted American bases in Syria and Iraq, and the Americans have attacked the militias in return. Local people are [fearful](#) of the conflict spreading and of being caught in the middle of the fighting. And Iran has [warned](#) that should America target Iranian forces, they would respond firmly.

## **Germany**

This last month should have shattered any remaining illusions that international organisations and Western democracies act as a source of order and restraint. In few places can this be more true than in Germany, where collective guilt over the holocaust has blinded the whole political establishment to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. But many of Germany's restrictions on protestors who want to show their solidarity with Palestine will seem only too familiar to Kurds and their supporters.

This week, Germany has been much in Kurdish thoughts as Sunday will be the thirtieth anniversary of the German ban on the PKK. The ban has been used to criminalise all sorts of political activity, and to support more recent "terrorist" listings.

Medya News has marked the ban anniversary with two interviews. Duran Kalkan, of the PKK Executive, [answered](#) a series of written questions. He explained that the ban was introduced as a political solution for a major trial of PKK members, including himself, that had become bogged down under a huge weight of documents and discredited witnesses. By declaring the PKK itself a criminal organisation, the German parliament hoped to make the defendants automatically guilty, but they took their case to the European Court of Human Rights, and, in 2001, the European court overturned their convictions. Kalkan explained that "This verdict legally and morally rejected the 26 November decision [that brought in the ban], highlighting its political and economic motivations." The PKK won the argument, but the ban remains.

German lawyer, Anna Magdalena Busl, [spoke](#) with Erem Kansoy. She explained that, while the ban was never justified from the start, this became



even clearer after 1995, when the PKK publicly renounced violence. The PKK have demonstrably committed no crimes in Germany, and posed no threat to internal security. Busl argued that the denial of basic democratic rights to one part of the population effects the whole of German society, and that the ban has to be fought both in the courts, where there are many cases against Kurds, and on the streets. She elaborated that we need to fight for recognition that this is a conflict in international law (as ruled by the Belgian courts) and that it is Turkey that is the aggressor and agent of terror.

The ban anniversary has been marked by many actions calling for it to be lifted, including a thousands-strong [rally](#) in Berlin last Saturday. Several people were detained by police in Germany, and there were also [detentions in London](#), at one of the supporting protests that were held outside German embassies in different parts of Europe. Ten London demonstrators will face criminal proceedings for displaying PKK flags.

The day before the Berlin demonstration, Erdoğan visited Germany. The usual constraints of NATO membership and the EU refugee deal ensured that political differences over Israel were put to one side. Erdoğan also wants Germany to agree to [Turkey purchasing Eurofighter Typhoon jets](#). They have the agreement of the UK and of Spain, but are not expected to be able to persuade Germany.

## **Freedom for Öcalan**

I began this review with Özgür Özel who has tried to appeal to the Kurds while dismissing and insulting the Kurdish leader. He wouldn't have to look far to see the importance given to Öcalan and the respect in which he is held. Last weekend, convoys from many cities converged on Gemlik in Bursa to form a [Freedom March](#). Gemlik is the place from where the boat leaves for Öcalan's island prison, but no-one has been allowed any contact with him at all for 32 months. Öcalan's isolation has also been [raised in parliament](#), taking advantage of the foreign affairs budget meeting.

Across the world, international organisations are holding meetings and making actions as part of the [international campaign](#), Freedom for Abdullah Öcalan: a political solution for the Kurdish Question: actions such as the [installation](#) representing Öcalan's imprisonment and isolation that was erected on the esplanade des Invalides in Paris this week, and the [book days](#) planned for 10 December.

### **Mexican postscript**

I will end with a postscript that takes us to the other side of the world. Two weeks ago, I mentioned that the Zapatistas had announced a major restructuring. They have now published a [description of the result](#). This is a bottom-up democracy evolved to resist outside pressures. The pattern is familiar, but there is sure to be a lot to learn from in the implementation.

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