

Giving peace a chance? – a weekly news review

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Might we be seeing the first steps in the complicated dance that could lead to a political solution to the Kurdish Question? Toes are already being trodden on, but comments made by the chair of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) in a televised documentary, may have provided an opening onto that dance floor.

The CHP regard themselves as the inheritors of Kemalism, the philosophy of Turkey's founding father, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which is centred on ethnic nationalism. Historically, they have not recognised Kurdish identity, and they have been very wary of showing sympathy for the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) lest they alienate nationalist supporters. Even after the last local elections, when the HDP told their followers to back the CHP in the big cities and so secured their victory, the CHP gave no public

acknowledgement of the HDP's support; and their electoral alliance is with the conservative nationalist İYİ Party, which is not sympathetic to the HDP. CHP Chair Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu's comments walked a fine line. He couched a suggestion that the HDP could act as an interlocutor for peace in a condemnation of President Erdoğan's failed peace process, which he criticised for talking instead with Abdullah Öcalan in İmralı prison. As Kılıçdaroğlu put it, 'We need a legitimate body to resolve the Kurdish question... İmralı is not a legitimate body.' However, the HDP, which is 'inside the Parliament and doing its duty' is a legitimate body.

HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, is determined to treat this as a positive invitation to engagement, and thus help make it so, but he, too, has a difficult path to steer. The first response to Kılıçdaroğlu's remarks came from a former HDP co-chair, Sezai Temelli, who was considerably less tactical, insisting that resolution would only come through İmralı. Anyone who is serious about achieving a peaceful solution knows that, for any agreement to be accepted, Öcalan will have to be included in the negotiations, but this will have to be achieved through careful negotiation. A peace agreement must include those who are doing the fighting, and Öcalan is the leader of the PKK. Kılıçdaroğlu himself will be aware of this, just as the UK's Conservative government recognised the need to talk with the IRA in order to achieve the Northern Ireland Agreement, although it initially carried out talks with them in secret; and just as President de Klerk recognised the importance of speaking with, and even releasing, Nelson Mandela.

Erdoğan's failed negotiations can rightly be criticised for avoiding a parliamentary role and using the HDP only as mediators. From his prison cell, former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş commented via Twitter, "The HDP that I know aspires to resolve all problems of Turkey, including the Kurdish question; it is a political actor of its own will and it is – of course – an interlocutor. The place where it is to be resolved is naturally the Grand National Assembly of Turkey." And he followed with a comment on the participation of all parties in order to achieve resolution. Sancar has echoed Demirtaş's points, stating, "The place of resolution is the Parliament; no actor can be ignored." And, yesterday, HDP Spokesperson, Ebru Günay, made clear that, "The place for a democratic and peaceful solution is of course the

parliament. This reality has been repeatedly expressed by Mr. Öcalan during the peace process.” At the same time, she pointed out that ‘There is no way to ignore the reality of Mr. Öcalan’.

Erdoğan has responded to these moves with a belligerent declaration that employs the old nationalist trope of denying Kurdish identity: “There is no such problem in Turkey. We have already solved this problem, we have overcome it, we have finished it.” His response leaves the floor open for the CHP to put themselves forward as the party for peace and accommodation – and also for them to respond positively to Demirtaş’s call for opposition parties to come together in support of democracy (which I wrote about last week). This will sit more easily with some party members than others, and heated debates will be going on within the CHP’s offices.

The backdrop to these debates is the Turkish government’s attempts to use the politicised judicial system to remove the HDP – attempts which the CHP opposes, but not very actively. This week saw the resumption of the Kobanê Case trial, which could put 108 leading HDP members behind bars for life, and which will soon be joined by the case for shutting down the party itself. This is how Erdoğan ‘solves’ the Kurdish Question. Both cases are based on terrorist charges. Turkey classes the PKK as terrorists – although when this definition was tested in the Belgian courts it was ruled that the PKK should properly be considered not as terrorists but as a party in a non-international armed conflict. Erdoğan’s government refuses to see a distinction between the PKK and the HDP, even though the HDP is a legally constituted political party that is careful not to step outside the law.

HDP members are far from alone in being accused of terrorism. Between 2016 and 2020, Turkey’s public prosecutors launched over one and a half million investigations for terrorist crimes. To put that into perspective, if all else was equal (and if most of these were against different people), if you travel on a sixty-seater coach in Turkey, on average one of your fellow passengers will have been prosecuted for terrorism. If you believe the Turkish government’s decidedly optimistic Covid statistics, then each person you meet is three times more likely to have been investigated for terrorism than to be currently infected with coronavirus. The reason, of course, for this

epidemic of 'terrorism' is that the almost any act of opposition to the Turkish government has been labelled as terrorist. This is in striking contrast to the treatment of ISIS suspects, where, as Metin Gurcan observes in al-Monitor, 'Scores of... cases against IS suspects have been marked by judicial oddities and what many observers see as obtrusive leniency on the part of the Turkish judiciary.'

Turkey is an extreme case, but the redefinition of terrorism to suit government interests is a feature of most legal systems. The popular understanding of the term is very far from most legal definitions, which is why people are constantly surprised by who terrorism law is used against. In the UK, for example, the legal definition of what constitutes a terrorist act includes serious damage to property or web disruption in support of an ideological cause. And there need not be any actual damage; a 'terrorist' may have only collected information on how such damage could be carried out. For British prosecutors, terrorism need have nothing to do with causing terror – the crucial feature is that the action is inspired by oppositional ideology. So, it is not surprising that states such as the UK have little problem in adding the opponents of their ally, Turkey, to their terrorism lists, and allowing this to colour their international relations.

'Terrorism' is not the only area where there is a brutal gap between common understandings and the world of hard politics. This is also manifest in approaches to democracy and freedom, though in this case, the official focus on realpolitik is generally defined by practice rather than in law.

As we bemoan the lack of international response to Turkey's latest outrage against human rights, and ponder why all sorts of groups that instigate terror are invited into international forums, while Kurds seeking to negotiate peace and dignity are rebuffed, then, Henry Kissinger's famous quote can provide a salutary reminder of political realities: "America has no permanent friends or enemies, only interests". Other nations are no different, just less powerful. National interests – as perceived by ruling elites – are what counts.

The resulting hypocrisy and double standards are especially blatant when international organisations are asked to respond to war crimes, such as the

use of chemical weapons, as a new report from the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) points out. When America's enemies are accused of using chemical weapons, this becomes a 'red line', but when Turkey does so, the world looks away. The failure to investigate doesn't mean that international organisations don't believe that chemical attacks have taken place, they might rather just not have them confirmed.

The KNK states that Turkey started to use chemical weapons against the Kurds in the 1990s, and were encouraged to continue by the lack of international response. They were used in Turkey's invasions of Afrîn and of Serekaniye, in Syria, and now there have been dozens of reports of their use in the Turkish assault on the mountains of South Kurdistan/northern Iraq. The war in South Kurdistan is one that international media and governments have generally preferred to ignore altogether. If it is mentioned at all, then this is done within the Turkish framing that depicts the PKK as terrorists and thus a legitimate target, and it is not recognised as a Turkish invasion. The KNK report claims that the PKK guerrillas 'are forced to defend themselves against chemical attacks almost on a daily basis'. The PKK has shared photographs of the bodies of guerrillas asphyxiated in their tunnels, as well as of plumes of gas.

On 4 September, a Turkish chemical bomb is reported to have hit one of the South Kurdistan villages where some of the local residents are still trying to hang on despite surrounding attacks. A couple and their adult daughter were taken to hospital with breathing difficulties, coughing, and burning eyes after being engulfed in its grey smoke, and their symptoms persist. The authorities claim that they do not have the equipment needed to test for chemicals, but the victims believe that they are afraid to acknowledge what happened. The Christian Peacemakers Team, who have been monitoring the war's impact on civilians, think that it was a chemical attack and plan to pursue confirmation.

Every week, there are reports of more Turkish attacks in Syria, in breach of the agreed ceasefire, and of more atrocities committed in Turkish-occupied Afrîn – none of which garner an international response.

On Wednesday, escalating attacks by Turkish mercenaries on the district of Ain Issa left one villager dead and six more injured. Firat News Agency reports that the area has been attacked by heavy weapons 65 times since the beginning of this month, killing five villagers, as Turkey attempts to drive the residents away and expand its occupation in a strategically important area.

In Afrîn, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported a Turkish-backed militia assaulting workers from a relief organisation, as well as examples of ransom demands and property theft. And journalist Lindsey Snell, shared a video in which 'A woman imprisoned by military police in Turkish-occupied Afrin talks about beatings, rape, forced confessions, a lack of food, a lack of medical care, forced abortions, and children in prison suffering the same.'

The failure of the official international authorities to act has led activists to step in and do what these bodies are meant to do. This week, a recently-established Turkey Tribunal has been hearing evidence in Geneva on Turkey's human rights violations. is an independent initiative co-ordinated by a law professor at the University of Gent and registered in Belgium, and is crowd-funded. It is presided over by judges and academics and is being monitored by observers from the European Parliament; however, like the Permanent People's Tribunal, which heard evidence on Turkey and the Kurds in 2018, it's opinion will have no legal authority. Its purpose is to inform and raise awareness among a wider public, and its online sessions have already been followed by thousands of people. It is thus part of the wider international activist movement that is needed to force the political authorities to respond to Turkey's actions. As anyone who has campaigned for the Kurds quickly discovers, Turkey is quick to try and disrupt all criticism of its actions wherever it is made, and the Turkish embassy attempted to get the tribunal cancelled with false allegations that it had misrepresented its purpose and funding to the hotel where it was held. After studying reports and listening to witnesses, the judges were highly critical of Turkey's actions in all the areas they looked at, and gave their view that 'the acts of torture and enforced disappearances committed in Turkey could amount to crimes against humanity'. The head of the Tribunal concluded, "With this unequivocal

opinion from the judges, we will move forward to take the Erdogan government to the International Criminal Court.”

Most of us do not have the skills and opportunity for this sort of work, but all hands are needed to build a mass movement that can force political action. In Italy, campaigners have been rewarded by the awarding of honorary citizenship to Öcalan by the Municipality of Rignano Flaminio in Rome; and in France, public recognition has been given to Hevrin Khalaf with a square named after her in Lyon (though the city’s website omits to mention that she was killed by Turkey’s mercenaries).

Beginning this time next week, campaigners for freedom for Öcalan will be camped near the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. They will demand that the European institutions take action to enforce the changes specified by the council’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture, and allow Öcalan access to his family and lawyers in line with internationally accepted law on human rights. Of course, ending Öcalan’s isolation is also key to the success of any future peace negotiations.