

# “Surely there is more to come. It will be no less inspiring...” – a weekly news review

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## Sarah Glynn

Among the speakers who addressed the hundreds of thousands celebrating Newroz in snowy Van, was the world's best-known living intellectual. Noam Chomsky observed, in his video message, that Kurdish resistance teaches that "the human spirit can not only imagine, but also achieve", adding, "Surely there is more to come. It will be no less inspiring. It will be no less significant in influencing the shape of future history".

Last week, in the cities of south-east Turkey (North Kurdistan), millions of people came together in celebration – over a million gathered in Amed (Diyarbakir) alone. Newroz, the spring new year festival that is celebrated in many places in the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond, has been given an additional and powerful meaning by the Kurdish Freedom Movement. For the Kurds, the festival is associated with the ancient story of Kawa the Blacksmith, who liberated the land from the tyrant king Dehaq, thus ending the winter darkness. The movement has given the old story a new purpose, with Newroz becoming a celebration of the freedom struggle and an engine for strengthening Kurdish culture and belonging. Despite obstruction from the Turkish state – and even the deaths of dozens of people when police and security fired on the crowds celebrating Newroz in Cizre and Nusaybin in 1992 – the festival has only grown in importance. Last week, amid all the oppression coming from the Turkish government, Newroz provided a powerful demonstration that the Kurdish Freedom Movement will not, and cannot, be silenced.

Those coming to the celebrations had to pass through numerous checkpoints and detailed searches. People described taking five hours to get through into the festival area. Traditional clothes were banned – even five-year-old twins dressed in Kurdish colours were detained, along with their mother, and prevented from entering. Police attacked people in Amed with gas, rubber bullets, and water cannon, and police also attacked in Mardin. On Newroz itself, at least 488 people were detained in different parts of Turkey, including performing artists and 173 minors. But the crowds were the biggest they have been since the end of the aborted peace process. And too many people were shouting out “Bijî Serok Apo” (Long live leader Apo, the nickname for Abdullah Öcalan) for them all to be arrested.

The celebrations took place in some seventy places across Turkey, and they were led by the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), which the government is seeking to ban. The people demanded freedom for Öcalan, education in Kurdish, the release of sick prisoners, and promotion of democracy. The HDP’s Group Deputy Chair, Saruhan Oluç, told a press conference at the Turkish parliament, “The people demonstrated that they reclaim their own

future and the HDP. They stated that they are committed to peace, and support Abdullah Öcalan's peace manifesto, which was read in Diyarbakır in [Newroz] 2013".

The gatherings in Turkey, in Rojava, in Qandil, in Maxmur, in Şengal, and across the Kurdish diaspora demonstrated passionate and mass support for Öcalan's ideas, which have inspired both the PKK and the HDP, and also the PYD in Syria, and the YBŞ in Şengal. Newroz gave a firm answer to those who would attempt to draw the Kurds away from Öcalan's philosophy. As Ferda Cetin explained in Yeni Ozgur Politika, "The 2022 Newroz demonstrated that the 'good Kurd – bad Kurd' policy that the US and European states still want to pursue will receive no echo from the Kurdish people. It made it clear that the 'good Kurd' they want is simply a collaborator..."

Although Americans must be fully aware of the importance of Newroz to their Syrian Democratic Forces allies, President Biden made no reference to the festival's political connotations in his "Happy Nowruz" tweet, which conjures up images of a thanksgiving dinner: "Jill and I want to extend our best wishes to all who are celebrating Nowruz around the world. The Nowruz holiday means gathering at the Nowruz table to give thanks for loved ones, reflect on your blessings, and welcome all the possibilities of a new season..."

### **Meanwhile in Ukraine**

While this massive manifestation of belief in the possibility of building a better future was making itself felt in the different parts of Kurdistan, and the different locations where Kurds have emigrated, it was hardly noticed in most of the world. In most places, it takes a lot for Kurdish issues to make the news, and now, all other news has to compete with the horror and danger of war in Ukraine. Many people have pointed out that attention given to those suffering in Ukraine far eclipses attention given to victims of other conflicts. The Ukraine narrative also eclipses all other struggles. The war in Ukraine is presented in simplistic black and white terms – ignoring the role of imperial power struggles or any serious political analysis – as an ideological duel between autocracy and liberalism. Just when people were beginning to ask

questions about a system that is driving the world towards increasing inequality and irreversible climate change, criticism of liberalism has been put on hold. The Western embrace of liberalism has gained ideological reinforcement, and the struggle for the urgently needed alternative has been pushed back into the margins. The message of hope coming out of Amed and Van and the other Kurdish cities receives only a feeble response.

World leaders are playing poker with all our futures, and they are able to do this because of the way they can manipulate genuine emotions of empathy and fairness. It has been terrifying to watch how people's human and humane responses to the accounts and images from Ukraine's war-ravaged cities are being manipulated to beat the drums of war. Across the Western world, instead of analysing how to de-escalate the crisis and facilitate a negotiated end to the violence before there is even more death and destruction, people are falling back on gut emotions, where positive instincts of sympathy and fairness, and a desire to help the victims of Russian aggression, are feeding into a new militarism more dangerous than that during the Cold War. As Chomsky – again – makes clear, it is necessary to work out the least bad option, not indulge in heroic and dangerous illusions of meting out justice. This failure to focus on negotiation and de-escalation has left the door open for Turkey to boost their international credentials (while also maintaining their relationship with both sides of the conflict) by attempting to act as a mediator. That this role should be left to a state that is itself responsible for unprovoked invasion and for destabilising another part of the world, is a further shameful indictment of those who claim to be acting in Ukraine's interests. A peace deal has to be welcomed, but peace in Eastern Europe should not have to be at the expense of boosting a major perpetrator of war in the Middle East.

### **Turkey's foreign aggression**

Turkey has carried out three major incursions into Syria, and, unnoticed by Western media, keeps up its attacks against frontline villages in defiance of agreed ceasefires. The areas that Turkey has occupied are places of danger for existing residents, but safe havens for ISIS. And Turkey's project of ethnic cleansing and demographic change was given a further boost last week with

the announcement of the second phase of a housing project in occupied Afrîn, which is being built for Palestinians and people from other parts of Syria, and is funded by Kuwait-based charity, “White Hands”. This new settlement is in what, before the Turkish invasion, was a predominantly Yazidi village. Most of its former inhabitants fled to escape the violence and anti-Yazidi attacks of Turkey’s militant Islamist mercenaries.

In northern Iraq, the Turkish military is carrying out an extensive aggressive campaign. Its ostensible target is the PKK’s guerrillas, but Turkey is also expanding its growing network of military bases in the region, and Turkish attacks have driven local people from their homes and land, emptying, or nearly emptying, hundreds of villages. While the guerrillas celebrated Newroz, Turkish shells continued to pound the region, though without casualties.

### **More crackdowns in Turkey**

The Turkish government also attacks all opposition within its own borders.

Norwegian PEN, who have monitored trials of writers and journalists in Turkey for decades, have published a second annual report on the indictments used in Turkey’s courts and their (non) compliance with domestic and international law. Their report looks in detail at ten indictments drawn up in 2021. They found a wide range of laws were being used to curtail freedom of expression and that “interferences against the right to freedom of expression in Turkey have become unbridled”. They record that the indictments were often unintelligible, failed to establish the relationship between evidence given and the alleged crime, and excluded evidence that could favour the accused. And they note that, “The examination by our legal experts of the indictments chosen revealed that even shooting a documentary, publishing the data of academic research, or giving an interview about the problems in the judicial system as a lawyer could be the subject of an indictment. We were, of course, aware of this broad nature of violations of freedom of expression at the beginning of our work. The results of this scientific study, however, revealed a level of disproportionateness that was shocking.” They conclude that, like last year, “the common observation of the reports this year is that the indictments were not drafted in accordance with domestic law and the international law. The common criticisms against the indictments examined are striking. For

example, it will be seen in many reports that there are statements such as “this indictment should never have been written” or “even writing this indictment is a disproportionate interference with the freedom of expression”.

Last week saw the deaths of two more political prisoners. Both were young men, and in both cases, their families were suspicious of the cause of death given by the authorities. Sinan Kaya, aged 28, was serving a three-year sentence at Iğdir S Type Closed Prison and was in a solitary cell when the prison administration claimed he committed suicide. Can Güder was only twenty and had been given an eighteen-year sentence while only a minor. He took part in the big hunger strike that called for an end to Öcalan’s isolation in 2019. The administration of Van F Type Closed Prison claims that Güder died of a heart attack, but he had no history of chronic illness, and the forensic examination took place without the presence of his family or his lawyer.

Human Rights Association member and trade unionist Firat Akdeniz was given a six-year sentence for “membership of a terrorist organisation” based on his attendance at press conferences and statements made by an anonymous witness. His lawyer points out that this case was filed just after Akdeniz had made a criminal complaint against police officers for torturing him.

The fourth hearing of the case against the Saturday Mothers took place in Istanbul. The defendants are mothers and other relatives of people who were disappeared by the state in the 1990s. From 1995, they gathered every week in Istanbul’s Galatasary Square to demand justice, and in 2018, on the 700th Saturday, the protest was banned and attacked by police with tear gas. The next hearing will not be held until September.

Last week also saw a further hearing in the trial for the 1992 murder of the influential Kurdish writer and journalist, Musa Anter, who was assassinated by the Turkish state’s illegal intelligence organisation, JİTEM. Anter’s family and lawyer are concerned that proceedings are being deliberately delayed so that the case is not completed before it falls under a thirty-year statute of limitations in September. A banner above the press conference held before

the hearing read, “There are no statutory limitations for crimes against humanity”.

And, despite the European Court of Human Rights ruling for Osman Kavala’s immediate release, and the Council of Europe instigating infringement proceedings that could see Turkey’s role in the Council restricted or even ended altogether, Istanbul’s 13th High Criminal Court has ruled to continue to keep the businessman/philanthropist in prison.

### **Pressure on the HDP**

Pressure on the HDP continues. Last week, Van MP, Murat Sarısaç, was given a one and a half year suspended sentence for “propagandising for a terrorist organisation”, based on his social media posts; Turkey’s Constitutional Court rejected the appeal by HDP MP, Semra Güzel, against the lifting of her parliamentary immunity, and a warrant was issued for her arrest; There were court hearings for the dismissed HDP Co-Mayor of Çınar, Necla Tamriş, and for Eğil Municipality Council Member, Bahar Karakaş Uluğ; and police carried out a prolonged raid on the the HDP party office in Istanbul’s Kartal district.

### **HDP mayors and the Council of Europe**

Not everything can be put on hold for Ukraine, and this week’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities at the Council of Europe continued its monitoring of the local democracy of member states, among a sprinkling of blue and yellow flags. Wednesday was Turkey’s turn, and much of the discussion focussed on the Turkish government’s dismissal and detention of HDP mayors and their replacement with appointed trustees, and how this is facilitated by an “overly broad interpretation” of what constitutes terrorism. Adalet Fidan, one of only six remaining HDP mayors out of the 65 elected in 2019, has probably been saved from dismissal by her position as a Council of Europe Congress delegate, though she still has a police case against her – for protesting against a femicide. She was able to tell delegates about her own experiences and those of her comrades. Shockingly, one of the two speakers

from the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) supported the Turkish government's line linking the HDP to terrorism – thus demonstrating the difficulties that his party leader, Kemal Kiliçdaroğlu, faces in attempting to pursue a more reconciliatory path. The international delegates were unimpressed by the Turkish government's arguments – a councillor from the British Labour Party even observed that in labelling all political opponents as terrorists, Turkey is adopting the “language of Putin” – and the report and recommended changes were passed with a substantial majority. Turkey is sensitive to international opinion, so this matters, but it could matter a lot more if non-compliance were to result in sanctions on Turkey's role within the Congress and the Council of Europe.

### **Syrian refugees**

Turkey's relationship with Europe is complicated both by their position as a strategic member of NATO – which is now even more significant and complicated – and by the 2016 deal whereby the European Union effectively outsourced Syrian refugees to Turkey. The Turkish government likes to boast about accommodating more refugees than any other country in the world, but – as in other countries – this is an issue that has also elicited some brutal and negative responses and is not a vote winner. Turkish law only grants full refugee status to people from European countries, and the Syrian refugees have been given only a temporary status. Now, even as thousands more refugees are arriving from Ukraine and also from Russia, Turkey is sending some Syrian refugees back to Syria, where they may be used to help carry out Turkey's projects for demographic change and where they will be far from safe. Thousands of Syrians have had their temporary protection cards cancelled, despite having completed the required administrative processes, and now face deportation.

### **Defeating ISIS**

In Northeast Syria, last week's third anniversary of the defeat of ISIS as a territorial force was marked by criticism of the failure of international powers to confront the ongoing threat posed by the organisation – a threat



highlighted by January's attack on Al-Sinaa Prison in Hasakah, and also by the continued violence in Al Hawl Camp (which houses ISIS families), and by attacks from ISIS sleeper cells. A letter from the Kurdish Friendship Group in the European Parliament to the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, also draws attention to these dangers and to their possible repercussions for Europe. It concludes, "Setting up appropriate structures to deal with the prisoners (courts, prisons, de-radicalisation programmes) will not be easy, but is desperately necessary. This is a clear and attainable goal, where European action could make a vital difference". It may be a difficult time to get attention for anything outside Ukraine, but it is tempting to hope that some people in power will understand the dangers of failing to take action, and the potential to make a real contribution to peace.