

Day-X is now: North and East Syria under attack – a weekly news review

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Last Saturday night, less than a week after Turkey's Home Minister, Süleyman Soyulu, defied evidence and logic to announce to the world that the bomb attack in Istanbul was carried out by the PKK and Rojava's People's Protection Units (YPG), Turkish jets began to bomb the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, launching an air assault that exceeds anything in their previous attacks. And President Erdoğan has repeated his warnings of an imminent ground assault. As many people had predicted, Erdoğan, who has long made clear his desire to launch another major attack on the region, has used the Istanbul bomb as a casus belli.

Erdoğan has publicly declared his intention to control a 30 km strip of Syria territory along the length of Turkey's southern border, combining his dreams of a greater Turkey with the destruction of Kurdish communities and of the multi-ethnic, feminist, radical democracy that they have created. Early in the Syrian civil war, the chair of the Turkish Intelligence Service, Hakan Fidan, said, "If necessary, I will send four men to Syria. I will fire eight missiles at Turkey and produce a justification for war." Today, with Turkey's general and presidential elections due to take place by next June, and with a large part of the Turkish population suffering from poverty wages, Erdoğan wants to reap his carefully cultivated popular nationalist support. He is planning for a kaki election, or, better still, a victory. As the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Foreign Affairs co-spokesperson, Hişyar Özsoy, points out, Erdoğan has made a habit of carrying out invasions prior to elections.

The fact that Soylu's accusation was never credible, and that it has been contradicted by every new piece of evidence, has not prevented international governments from responding as though it were legitimate. Even an incredible claim can be used as an excuse for inaction.

The Istanbul bombing

Last week I looked at some of the contradictions that had already begun to appear in the official narrative. I argued that neither the PKK nor the YPG had a motive to carry out the bombing – in fact, as Turkey's violent and predictable reaction demonstrates, quite the opposite – and that neither organisation participated in this kind of action against civilians. And I noted that the beneficiaries of such a bombing would be Erdoğan's government, who have a history of wrongly accusing the PKK, and the militant Islamists they work with, who have shown no compunction about targeting civilians

Before looking at the bloody, traumatic, and destabilising events of the last few days, and at reactions to them, I want to add the latest pieces of evidence that undermine Soylu's claims.

The people who have been arrested for the bombing are Arab, not Kurdish, and last Saturday, before Turkey launched their attack, we learnt that a man

who has been accused of organising the bombing had said in his police statement that his brother died fighting in the Free Syrian Army (FSA – the mercenary groups that fight for Turkey). Then, on Wednesday, Mazloum Abdi, the Commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the YPG, told Amberin Zaman in an interview for al Monitor that the SDF had established that “the woman who was arrested for planting the bomb comes from a family linked to the Islamic State. Three of her brothers died fighting for the Islamic State. One died in Raqqa, another in Manbij and a third died in Iraq. Another brother is a commander in the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition in Afrin. She was married to three different Islamic State fighters and the family is from Aleppo.”

This comes on top of the discovery that the woman’s phone had received calls from Mehmet Emin İlhan, a district president of the National Movement Party (MHP), the far-right party that is in alliance with Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP). İlhan claimed that this was a case of stolen identity. The Peoples’ Democratic Party has now called for a full investigation into the phone records.

North and East Syria

Turkey announced their attacks as “payback time”. They were carried out by a combination of warplanes, drones, and shelling. By Thursday evening, after five days, the death toll stood at: 16 civilians, 18 SDF soldiers, 24 Syrian regime soldiers, five members of the Afrîn Liberation Forces, one member of the local security forces (Asayish), and two Administration guards. Many more people are injured, both physically and psychologically.

Attacks have taken place right across the north of the region, but also in Deir ez-Zor, 70 km from the border. In Kobanê, a hospital, a school and a medical centre have all been hit. Many of the attacks have targeted energy infrastructure – electricity stations and oil sites. On Thursday, the city of Qamishlo was plunged into darkness. Ekrem Suleyman, who works in Jazira region’s Office of Electricity, told Rojava Information Centre, “these places which have been attacked... are very well-known spots and have been

precisely targeted. Turkey knows how to make instability here... if the fields and power stations are gone this is a massive problem. It will cause displacement and force migration. It is also a big economic problem”.

One of the targets on the first night was a power station near Derik, that had been hit several times before, despite not having any military function. This latest attack was a double tap: when local people came to help the wounded, the bombers struck again, leaving 11 people dead.

Attacks on civilian infrastructure are considered a war crime – but not, it seems, if you are a member of NATO.

By destroying the possibility of any form of normal life in the region, Turkey aims to turn the population against the administration, and also to drive people to leave the area altogether. They would then be replaced by refugees from other parts of Syria, who Turkey plans to send “back” and by the families of Turkey’s Islamist mercenaries. The instability Turkey creates provides fertile soil for the growth of ISIS, while their occupied areas provide ISIS with safe havens.

Another attack narrowly missed a prison housing captured ISIS fighters outside Qamishlo, and, on Wednesday, a Turkish drone attack hit an SDF security checkpoint for Al-Hol detention camp, which houses ISIS wives and families, many of whom remain committed to the group’s violent ideology. Six escapees have been recaptured, but it is not clear if there were more. Eight members of the SDF lost their lives.

YPG spokesperson, Nori Mahmoud, puts it bluntly: “Erdoğan is preparing to use Syrian Daesh for a ground attack with attacks on the Al-Hol camp and the prisons where ISIS is held in the north and east Syria. Erdoğan has allied with ISIS from the start against our forces.”

On Wednesday night, Mazloun Abdi stated that the SDF had to pause its anti-ISIS operations. He explained that, “due to our forces’ preoccupation with addressing the Turkish occupation, they cannot continue their mission of

pursuing ISIS cells. Currently, we're forced to be preoccupied with confronting Turkish aggression."

Besides the threat of a resurgent ISIS, Turkey has put day to day control over the occupied areas in the hands of other militant jihadi groups, including, increasingly, of Al Qaeda descendent, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Abdi told al Monitor that the most likely target of a ground invasion would be the symbolically important city of Kobanê, that this would not require much preparation, and that, "Unless there is a serious effort to deter Turkey, especially on the part of the United States and Russia, [Turkey] will do it." He was clear that the statements put out by the US and Russia were "absolutely not strong enough when compared against Turkey's threats and certainly not enough to deter further Turkish aggression. They need to do more". And he agreed that without permission from the US and Russia, Turkey would not carry out a ground offensive: "If there is a ground invasion it will be because such permission was accorded or because they chose to remain silent.

Russia and the United States both have troops on the ground, and, between them, they control the airspace, and both are guarantors of ceasefires with Turkey agreed after their last invasion in 2019. Both have tolerated Turkey's daily breaches of those ceasefires, and it appears that both have chosen not to stand in the way of Turkey's air attacks. Abdi notes that the war in Ukraine has made both more ready to appease Turkey, and that Russia wants the Autonomous Administration to come to an agreement with the Syrian regime in Damascus, but is not applying enough pressure on President Assad. He adds that US failure to formulate a clear policy "makes it harder for us to negotiate successfully with Damascus." Russia also wants to see a reconciliation between Assad and Erdoğan, which would effectively suffocate North and East Syrian autonomy. At the same time as killing Syrian regime soldiers and threatening invasion, Erdoğan has again expressed interest in a meeting with Assad, though there are still many problems in the way of any agreement, which would be opposed by the Islamist militias.

International response

At this time of existential crisis, the so-called international community is notable largely for its absence.

NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, called for Turkey's "response" to the Istanbul bomb to be "proportional", and this has been a repeated theme. But, as far as the YPG and PKK are concerned, there is nothing to respond to. Any proportion of zero is zero.

Statements from the United States display an extraordinary callousness towards their allies in the fight against ISIS. The Department of Defence condemned "the loss of civilian life that has occurred in both Turkiye and Syria as a result of these actions" while recognising "Turkiye's legitimate security concerns". What loss of life has there been in Turkey as a result of these actions? What about the deaths of their SDF allies? And why should Turkey have any security concerns from North and East Syria? "Justified security concerns" is another much repeated and deeply insidious phrase.

There have been statements of condemnation of various strengths from left groups and politicians, but little from those actually in power. Although the chair of Germany's Defence Committee was clear that the attacks lacked justification or evidence, a Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated that "The German government takes the suspicion that the PKK or groups close to the PKK are responsible for the Taksim attack very seriously", and merely called on Turkey to act "proportionately". And the interior Minister met with Soylu in Ankara on Monday to discuss, among other issues, cooperation in the "fight against terrorism". MEPs from the Kurdistan Friendship Group, including MEPs who had recently visited North and East Syria, gave a press conference at the European Parliament, but the emergency statement made by the Parliament's president only called on the Turkish authorities to "show restraint and respect international law and standards". A session has been timetabled to debate the airstrikes – but not until mid-December.

Iran

While bombs have been falling on North and East Syria, the revolution in Iran has only intensified – and so has the violence of the regime's crackdown. Internet blackouts make it difficult to comprehend all that is happening, but government forces are shooting to kill and wound, as well as carrying out abductions and torture. On Thursday, Iran's exiled Kurdish political parties called a general strike, shutting down city centres across Rojhelat (East or Iranian Kurdistan). By the end of that day, Hengaw Organization for Human Rights had recorded 112 civilian deaths in Rojhelat since the beginning of the protests in September, and more than 5,000 arrests.

The crackdown has been especially severe in Rojhelat, the epicentre of the revolution, and in the province of Sistan and Baluchistan, where Human Rights in Iran has recorded 126 deaths. Like the Kurds, the Baluchis have suffered severe ethnic-based oppression, and the two communities have shown solidarity towards each other despite being at different ends of the country. Total deaths in the whole of Iran are now at least 416, of which 40 were in Tehran.

Abdurrahman Gok, for Mesopotamia Agency, reports, "Everyone states that 'young women and men' lead the actions that started on September 17, adding: 'However, at this stage, their families, who tried to keep those young people off the streets at first, are now shoulder to shoulder with their children.' With this situation, it is emphasized that the demonstrations are now at the point of no return."

The Human Rights Council of the United Nations has voted, in a special session called by Germany, to set up a fact-finding investigation into Iran with a view to potential prosecutions in international courts. While this can be welcomed, it is highly unlikely to make the Iranian government moderate its behaviour, let alone step down.

On Monday, Iran carried out another airstrike on the Iraqi bases of two Rojhelat parties – Komala, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran – and also on one of their refugee camps, where one person was killed.

Tanks and armoured vehicles are being moved towards the Iraqi border. Iran claims that these are to prevent the exiled groups accessing Iran, though they can also be seen as a threat to Iraq for hosting the Kurdish opposition groups. Meanwhile, Iraq is redeploying federal guards along its borders with Iran and Turkey. In the Iranian case, this appears to have been requested by Iran to control cross border movement.

Turkey

Within Turkey itself, the main “opposition” party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), which is founded on ethnic nationalism even while it claims to be a social democratic party, is cowed into silence. As Öszoy explains, “They realize the scheme Erdoğan put forward, but they remain silent because they are either nationalists themselves or are afraid of a nationalist wave.”

And the usual round of oppression continues. Many people have been detained for protesting against the attacks on North and East Syria, and for attempting to commemorate the Suruç bomb attack, when ISIS killed 33 young people who were on their way to help reconstruct Kobanê in 2015, after the city had broken the ISIS siege. Women were battered and detained while campaigning against violence against women. And the Kobanê case moved onto its next session. This is the case in which 108 people, including leading members of the HDP, face potential life imprisonment without parole for calling on people to protest against the ISIS attack on Kobanê in 2014, and against the Turkish Government’s refusal to help the defence or even to allow individuals to cross the border to defend the besieged city.

On the European Street

In Europe, Turkey’s attacks drew people onto the streets in spontaneous demonstrations, and bigger planned demos have followed. Demonstrators want to show their solidarity with those under attack and to put public

pressure on their own governments to stop ignoring Turkish aggression and authoritarianism. There are many actions that governments can take without resorting to sanctions that harm the wider population – beginning with an end to arms sales. Protestors in Hamburg were met with teargas and police truncheons because they insisted on their right – recently confirmed in court – to carry YPG flags. PKK flags are firmly banned, as they are now in the UK. The campaign to remove the PKK from the European Union’s Terrorist list recognises how this listing, which was clearly made for political reasons rather than legal ones, is being used to delegitimise the Kurdish Struggle and allow Turkey to oppress the Kurds with impunity. It needs to be accompanied by a drive towards resumption of peace talks.

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