

Colonial powers and international institutions, the cases of Syria and Gaza – a weekly news review

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[11:08 am 28/01/2024](#)

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Sarah Glynn

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the Council of Europe, this week has seen a flurry of rumours about American plans to leave Iraq and Syria, and the long-awaited conclusion of a deal to allow Turkey to buy [American F16 fighter jets](#) in exchange for lifting their veto on Sweden's entry into NATO.

Will America leave Iraq and Syria?

Information on America's plans for their 2500 troops in Iraq and 900 troops in the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria must largely be gleaned from off-the-record conversations with government officials. A [long report](#) by Amberin Zaman for Al-Monitor suggests a serious absence of strategic planning on behalf of the United States, leading to questions over why troops are still there.

Their ostensible purpose is to continue the fight against ISIS, which is still believed to have about 1000 fighters active in each country. The number of US troops in Iraq was roughly halved in 2020-21, when they announced an end to their combat role, and they have been focussed on working with and training the Iraqi army.

Plans for discussions with the Iraqi government over a final withdrawal were made last August. US support for Israel's war on Gaza has brought new pressures. Iran-backed militias in Iraq have targeted US bases in both Iraq and North and East Syria, and the US has struck back. This has increased resentment at the US presence in Iraq, and pressure on the Iran-friendly Iraqi prime minister to call on the US to leave. American troops can't enjoy being sitting ducks either. Talks over withdrawal from Iraq are [anticipated to begin within days](#).

Withdrawal from Iraq is expected to mean withdrawal from Syria, too. The troops there are part of the same anti-ISIS mission, and the Syria-based forces are dependent logistically on the US base in Erbil. The Pentagon is reported to have undertaken simulation exercises for US withdrawal from Syria last spring, and the US Government has been carrying out a review of its Syria policy. American departure from Syria is widely regarded as "inevitable if not imminent". It is unlikely before the US presidential election in November, since

President Biden would not want to be seen abandoning America's Kurdish allies; but he mightn't have such qualms if re-elected, and Donald Trump has previously shown that he doesn't care. Zaman notes that, "Since the start of the Ukraine conflict, US engagement with the Syrian Kurds has conspicuously thinned, with several top [Syrian Democratic Forces or] SDF-linked officials granted visas to travel to Washington only to have them rescinded."

While US withdrawal is usually something to be welcomed, and must be the long-term aim, in the case of North and East Syria, it is the presence of those American troops that is currently stopping Turkey from carrying out another ground invasion. Not that the US have stopped Turkey carrying out catastrophic destruction of the region's infrastructure by air, nor given the SDF the air defence systems that would enable them to protect the region themselves. SDF Commander Mazloun Abdi told Zaman that "Our American partner's silence as our schools, hospitals and power plants are being destroyed, as civilians are being killed in Turkish drone strikes, regrettably leads us to a sole conclusion: that the Turks are acting with the unspoken blessing of the United States."

It looks as though, yet again, America will "get the hell out" with little thought of the future of the place they are leaving. The Pentagon proposals exposed by Zaman in Al-Monitor, which envisage the SDF partnering with the Syrian regime forces in the fight against ISIS, are totally unrealistic. When Abdi was informed, he commented "It is the first I am hearing of this. It is utterly unviable given the state of our relations with the Assad regime, which refuses to consider any meaningful dialogue with us for a democratic future for the whole of the country, including for the Kurds, and the state of the Syrian Arab Army, which is incapable of defending its territories against Daesh, let alone ours."

As North and East Syria [celebrates](#) the ninth anniversary of the liberation of Kobanê from ISIS, Turkish attacks have left the people of the region struggling for basic survival, and American betrayal could bring an end to the physical realisation of the hope that Kobanê embodies.

In the area captured by Turkey when Trump began to pull out US troops in 2019, which has become a gangster-land of oppression, violent exploitation and extreme brutality, Turkey has begun to [build a new border wall](#) 15km into Syrian territory; and the F16 sale was [agreed](#) by US legislators following Turkey's [approval](#) of Sweden's NATO membership this week, meaning Turkey's ability to attack all the Kurdish regions will only increase. At the same time that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling raises the possibility of America being found guilty of aiding Israeli genocide, Biden is pushing through a deal to sell a new generation of planes that Turkey will use for its war crimes in North and East Syria.

The growth of Iran

In a bitter twist of irony, the biggest winner from US intervention in the Middle East has been their arch-enemy, Iran. The Iranian people are suffering economic hardship as well as stifling and brutal oppression, but the "Islamic Revolutionary" leadership has built up its power across the region, and reinforced it through international ties with China, Russia and the BRICS countries.

Iraq now has an Iran-friendly government as well as officially recognised pro-Iranian militias in its Popular Mobilisation Forces, and Iran-backed militias have been targeting US bases.

In Syria, Iran has been welcomed as an ally by President Assad, and the Iranian regime has exploited Syria's civil war to build their own economic and political power within the country. They have also helped efforts by Assad to destabilise the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

In the Hague

Meanwhile, the world has been focussed on the International Court of Justice in the Hague, and the meaning of the ICJ ruling for the Palestinians, for Israel, for international politics and for the prospects for international justice.

Faced with overwhelming evidence, the ICJ ruled that South Africa's arguments that Israel is committing genocide in Gaza make a case that Israel will have to answer; and in their justification of this decision, the judges themselves compiled a formidable list of statements on the situation in Gaza by UN officials, and statements calling for genocidal actions by Israeli leaders. Their final decision will take many years, and they accepted the need for Provisional Measures to prevent the possibility of further genocidal action. However, after all that, they did not demand a ceasefire, as South Africa requested and for which the people of Gaza are crying out. They only stipulated that Israel obey the rules – which they are already obliged to do under the genocide convention.

Israel had made it clear that they would not abide by the court's rulings, and they are maintaining their stance of self-righteous aggression; but if the ICJ had demanded a ceasefire it would have drawn an unambiguous line and eliminated the scope for excuses. Already there is a wide range of opinion about the extent of military action that the court's wording permits – as well as claims by Israel that the court's refusal of South Africa's request for a ceasefire is vindication of the Israeli position.

If the Provisional Measures specified by the court were acted upon, then most of the fighting would have to stop – but if Israel were minded to keep to the rules, then they wouldn't be on trial for genocide. The United States, too, often considers itself above the rules that apply to everyone else. It is clearly no coincidence that, on the day of the ICJ ruling, which included the demand that Israel ensure that the people of Gaza receive essential relief, the United States [announced](#) that they were pausing funding to UNRWA – the UN relief agency in Palestine. America's action was a response to allegations by Israel that some employees (now fired) were involved in the Hamas attack on 7 October. America's lead has now been taken up by Canada, the UK, Italy, Australia, the Netherlands and Germany, who have all now suspended aid.

However, the potential for an eventual genocide verdict does put America, together with Israel's other backers, under pressure not to help Israel in such a way that they themselves could be found guilty of assisting genocide, and also under pressure to try and hold their Israeli allies back from further

genocidal violence. There have been suggestions that this court case could be the first of many.

Friday's ICJ ruling was a significant decision that will make it difficult for the political establishment and their media to continue to ignore the horror of Gaza's plight and Israel's responsibility for it. The ruling is a win for South Africa and a defeat for Israel and for Israel's Western supporters. However, I can't help being reminded of the aphorism, "the operation was successful, but the patient died". The lives of Palestinians still hang by a thread.

The ICJ has no way to enforce its decisions. It has to rely on the United Nations, which is at the mercy of the national interests of its member states. However, this court ruling does provide a tool that can be used by campaigners to put pressure on their own governments not to do anything that could be seen as assisting in this ongoing genocide.

The situation facing the world today provides a clear condemnation of our current political structures. For everyone struggling to bring an end to genocide and war crimes, wherever they are taking place, it is not enough to rely on established international bodies such as the United Nations and its courts, but yesterday's ICJ decision demonstrates the importance of engaging with these bodies as part of the bigger struggle.

In the Council of Europe

Here in Strasbourg, Tuesday's [Gaza debate](#) by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe raises more questions about how to engage with international institutions. The tenor of that debate is summed up in the opening comment of the speech made by Finnish MP, Kimmo Kiljunen: "I am not 100% sure where I am by listening to some of the statements today. We are supposed to be in the leading human rights organisation in Europe..." Kiljunen was expressing a feeling of shock and horror that was shared by MPs in the United European Left, but by very few members of other parliamentary groups, including his own group of Socialists Democrats and Greens.

The [Gaza motion](#) that was approved by the Parliamentary Assembly by a very large margin was similar to that passed by the European Parliament the week before.

It purported to call for a permanent ceasefire, but effectively negated that call by making it provisional on an immediate and unconditional release of the Israeli hostages and the dismantling of Hamas. It gave a green light to Israel to continue committing genocide.

When I talked afterwards with Paul Gavan, who spoke in the debate on behalf of the Left, he told me “I expected that there would be this broad coalition behind Israel... What I did not expect was that we take exactly the same line as the European Parliament... Our assembly – the human rights assembly – endorsed this... We are supposed to stand up for human rights... Instead, we stood up for the perpetrator of some of the most horrific actions that we’ve ever seen... I was talking to someone on the way out... and he said to me, ‘for the first time I feel ashamed to be a member of this assembly’ And that’s how I felt... We’ve crossed a Rubicon.”

While the motion condemns Hamas “in the strongest possible terms” for a “barbaric” act, there is no condemnation of Israel. They are simply described as launching a war against Hamas in response to the attack (no historical background is given) which “has resulted in” (innocent passive voice) the loss of thousands of lives, displacement and destruction. Even the “staggering number of innocent casualties” is blamed, not on Israel’s deliberate targeting of the people of Gaza, as announced by Israel’s own politicians, but on Hamas embedding themselves in the civilian population.

Almost every amendment that sought to make the motion give equal weight to Palestinian lives as it does to Jewish ones was voted down.

The motion expresses deep concern over rising antisemitism, but the repeated equating of all Jews with Zionism, and the constant privileging of the Zionist perspective by European governments, is feeding that antisemitism.

These decisions by the European Parliament and now the Council of Europe are not only morally and ethically bankrupt, but also politically reckless. They are hugely self-damaging with respect to Europe's already battered position in international politics. Europe's devotion to the American world view is ensuring that Europe, along with its so-called Western values, is increasingly despised across the global south. And this is happening at the same time as Europe has shot itself in the foot economically with its sanctions against Russia. Within Europe itself, these politics encourage prejudice and hate at the same time as building distrust in politicians, which all makes fertile soil for the growth of conspiracy theories and even more right-wing politics.

As Europe lurches towards the right, and even the far right, engaging with international organisations may seem a fruitless exercise, but Gavan also noted how, in a situation such as this, left politicians can make a mark as the only people actually standing up for the fundamental principles that the Council of Europe was established to defend: human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. "I had one nice moment," he told me. "There was a guy there employed as a cameraman... and he came up to me after I spoke, and he just said, 'thanks a millions for what you said.' And I took heart from that. People need to see a really vibrant left, really fighting against this horrific move towards fascism and far-right extremism... We have a duty to expose the hypocrisy and the lies of the political establishment across Europe."

Abdullah Öcalan

Thanks to our friends in the Left group, the Council of Europe is also a forum where we can get Kurdish issues into public debate and consciousness. In Wednesday's debate on preventing torture in prisons – which especially focused on systemic torture in Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey – the isolation of Kurdish leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was brought up in [three separate speeches](#).

It is now nearly three years since Öcalan was able to have any communication with his family or his lawyers or with anyone outside İmralı Island Prison.

Following on from similar mass applications last year, 1,330 lawyers in Turkey have lodged a [petition](#) with the Ministry of Justice requesting permission to meet with Öcalan and the three other prisoners held on the island.

They don't expect permission to be granted but their action helps raise the profile of the campaign against the prisoners' isolation. This campaign is also being highlighted by a mass [hunger strike](#) by political prisoners, which is being undertaken in alternating groups and is now into its 63rd day.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of Öcalan's imprisonment on 15 February, there will be many actions calling for his release. The 25-day [Long March](#) from Paris to Strasbourg is already underway, and will take in local marches, actions and meetings.

The only sure way to eliminate violence against minority or colonised groups – from Palestinians in Gaza to Kurds in Rojava – is to stop treating them as a security issue, or as a scapegoat to be blamed for government failures, and instead address the problems and prejudices that they face. For the Kurds, the person who could negotiate a new peaceful path is incarcerated in İmralı prison. Öcalan's freedom could open the gate onto that path.

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