

The curse of Turkish nationalism – a weekly news review

As Turkey's two presidential contenders compete for endorsement by far-right nationalists we can see how deeply nationalism is embedded in Turkish politics, and the lack of any mainstream will to oppose the Turkish Republic's foundational curse. Meanwhile, Kurds in Turkey's neighbouring states continue to be threatened too, sometimes by Turkey and sometimes – and this can be under Turkish pressure - by the government under which they live, as we have seen this week in Makhmour refugee camp in Iraq.

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As Turkey's two presidential contenders compete for endorsement by far-right nationalists we have been presented with a frightening picture of how deeply nationalism is embedded in Turkish politics, and the lack of any mainstream will to oppose the Turkish Republic's foundational curse. We have seen how this has led Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu to make an agreement that would undermine his democratic promises, and how it has allowed Syrian refugees and Kurds to be treated as political footballs. Politicians are eager to demonstrate how they will send refugees back to Syria, and eager to distance themselves from any suggestion that they might be sympathetic to the PKK, while accusing their rivals of PKK links. In this toxic political climate, any sympathy towards the Kurdish cause can be portrayed as equivalent to terrorism.

Turks and Kurds fought side by side in the struggle that gave birth to the republic, but once he was sure of power, Mustafa Kemal – who became known as Atatürk – stopped talking about Kurds as brother Muslims and began the creation of a secular nation-state based on a singular Turkish identity. The republic's first constitution, written in 1924, defined all citizens as Turks, and was quickly followed by laws designed to constrain expression of other identities. The approach of the new state was [made clear](#) by its first Prime Minister, İsmet İnönü, in 1925: "Nationalism is our only factor of cohesion.... In the face of a Turkish majority other elements have no kind of influence. We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or 'le Turquism'." Under Erdoğan Turkish nationalism has been combined with conservative Islam, allowing him to make populist appeals to both people's national and religious identities.

One hundred years of enforced Turkification has not succeeded in making Turkey universally Turkish, but it has made a society where Turks can feel racially superior and where criticism of Turkish nationalism is not popular. A society where, as last Sunday, young people dancing to Kurdish music can soon find themselves [lying face down on the ground with their hands cuffed behind their backs](#) forced by the police to listen to a Turkish military march. It is the Republican People's Party (CHP) of opposition presidential candidate, Kılıçdaroğlu, that is the descendant of Atatürk's party, but all mainstream politicians claim Atatürk's legacy.

Kılıçdaroğlu's nationalist protocol

In the second round of the presidential election tomorrow, Kılıçdaroğlu and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are competing for the votes of Sinan Oğan, the third candidate who was knocked out in the first round. Oğan is a former member of the far-right National Movement Party (MHP). He was the candidate of the Ancestor Alliance, whose most influential member was Ümit Özdağ, another former member both of the MHP and of the İYİ Party, who founded the anti-immigrant Victory Party in 2021. There is no guarantee that those who voted for Oğan in the first round will take his direction when deciding where to place their vote in the second – for many this could have been a protest vote – but this has not stopped the candidates from trying to demonstrate their nationalist credentials. On Monday, Oğan announced that he was supporting Erdoğan for president, and on Wednesday, Özdağ declared his support for Kılıçdaroğlu.

Özdağ's support was based on a protocol signed with Kılıçdaroğlu that has proved a major cause for alarm – including among Kılıçdaroğlu supporters who fear that the number of ultra-nationalist votes gained may not match Kurdish votes lost. The protocol reaffirms commitment to the constitutional clauses that stipulate that Turkey is an indivisible state and that all Turkish citizens are considered to be Turks, and it promises that “All refugees and undocumented migrants, especially Syrians, will be repatriated to their countries within a maximum period of one year”. It rules out any negotiation with the PKK, and, most controversially, it agrees to continue the practice of replacing local politicians dismissed under the – very elastic – terrorism act with government appointed trustees: a practice that Kılıçdaroğlu and his Nation Alliance had promised to get rid of as part of their democratic reforms. Unlike now, this would require a court decision, but democratic norms expect a replacement of a democratically elected politician to be made through democratic means, not by appointment.

The current trustee law has been used to remove almost all the mayors elected from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the last two rounds of local elections, and the protocol has been strongly condemned by the HDP and by the Green Left (Yeşil Sol) under whose banner the HDP

competed in the parliamentary election. However, the pro-Kurdish parties were left with no room for manoeuvre, and, after a period of debate, they came out with a clear call for supporters to continue to back Kılıçdaroğlu, arguing that the presidential vote was still a referendum on democracy and an opportunity to escape from dictatorial rule.

Everyone on the left is only too familiar with having their vote taken for granted in the knowledge that they will be forced to vote for the least-worst option. The Turkish presidential election is an extreme case of this, but the dangers that could follow Erdoğan's re-election are extreme too. Besides campaigning to persuade people to come to the ballot box, the HDP is preparing to help protect the boxes and ensure that all votes are recorded correctly, as questions continue to be raised about anomalous ballot figures from 14 May.

The refugees

The HDP is the only major party that is not arguing for refugee repatriation. Kılıçdaroğlu's one year promise is exceptionally hard – if probably impossible to implement – but his Nation Alliance had already taken a very hard line with a two-year deadline. Erdoğan had initially boasted about Turkish generosity in accepting refugees, but as this argument became increasingly unpopular, his civil servants used force and deceit to return large numbers of refugees to Syria, and he started boasting about the numbers that had gone back. He has also used the refugees to force European countries to accept his aggressive foreign policy, threatening to push them across Europe's borders if the European countries attempted to thwart him. The refugees are not returned to where they came from but become pawns in Turkish plans for demographic change, being placed in [barrack-like settlements](#) in the occupied areas, on land stolen from former residents and developed with the aid of charities in Qatar, Kuwait and Palestine. On Monday, Erdoğan announced plans for the deportation of one million Syrians, saying that an agreement had been made in April that Qatar would build 240,000 houses within three years.

The uneven playing field

Most people expect an Erdoğan win, but he does not want to leave anything to chance – or rather to democracy. Erdoğan and his ministers dominate the media and can make free use of their official phone accounts. Meanwhile Kılıçdaroğlu has [protested](#) to his Twitter followers, “Now I’m unable to send short messages about my campaign schedule to the members of the media. Telecommunication companies prevent me from sending SMS to journalists. A total blackout is now being imposed on me.”

This week has seen a further [round up of HDP/Green Left activists](#) as they carried out vital campaigning and election preparations. At least 177 people were detained across several cities.

Ahead of tomorrow’s crucial vote, the Turkish lira has [sunk to a new low](#) against the dollar and the central bank’s foreign currency reserves have dropped below zero for the first time in twenty-one years. Erdoğan has been using foreign reserves to stave off economic crisis and has been helped by injections of money from other countries such as the Gulf States. With many vital goods being imported, a plummeting lira translates into rising inflation. Inflation was widely discussed earlier in the campaign, but nationalism has deflected the debate. Economic problems can be blamed on others – foreign intervention, refugees – while accusations of collaboration with the PKK can excite more anger than the rising price of onions.

In Iraq

This has been a campaign in which Kurds have been repeatedly attacked, both through detentions and arrests and through the poisonous atmosphere created by populist nationalism. Kurds in Turkey’s neighbouring states continue to be threatened too, sometimes by Turkey and sometimes by the government under which they live, as we have seen this week in Makhmour camp in Iraq, which houses refugees from 1990s Turkey. Erdoğan’s continued dominance, and the reinforcement of anti-Kurdish and anti-PKK rhetoric in

Turkey, encourage these states to harden their own policies and actions, both willingly, and as a result of Turkish pressure.

In Iraq, Kurds who follow the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan and the Kurdish Freedom Movement are put under pressure by both the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government. They are also treated with suspicion by international powers. Those fighting as PKK guerrillas are dismissed as terrorists, and those trying to live their lives according to Öcalan's ideas are also branded as terrorists or as terrorist supporters. Turkish demands reach relatively receptive ears. Local and international powers do not want to allow the survival of alternatives to capitalist economy and top-down state organisation, and Turkey's insistence that the PKK is classified as a terrorist organisation provides a ready excuse to respond with brute force to the movement's ambitions for harmonious existence beyond state power.

And so long as Turkey targets its own aggression on Kurds who support the Kurdish Freedom Movement, they can expect little resistance – or even real criticism – from these powers, despite the fact that the Turkish army is bombing Iraqi sovereign territory and is carrying out a de facto occupation of an increasingly large part of northern Iraq. Erdoğan and his key supporters have demonstrated their desire to control large swathes of both Iraq and Syria, but the Iraqi Government and the KDP can repeat Turkey's claim that their attacks are only against the PKK, and if the PKK could be made to leave all would be well.

Irredentist maps show a greatly enlarged Turkey, but Turkish ambitions are also being met through less direct forms of control. In their pursuit of personal wealth, the Barzani family, who dominate the KDP, have become like vassals of Erdoğan's Turkish state. They aid the Turkish military and have supported Erdoğan's election campaign, despite his rejection by a large majority of Kurds in Turkey. In 2014, after PKK fighters had played a vital role in expelling ISIS, Masoud Barzani, KDP leader and, at that time, also president of the Kurdistan Region, came to Makhmour and [called the PKK his brothers](#), but now he no longer needs them.

The Iraqi government can never have been happy to see Makhmour camp become an autonomous town with its own anti-state rules and ethos, but they had let it be. However, they are under Turkish pressure to take control of the camp. Iraq is not powerful enough to stand up to its aggressive neighbour, and Turkey gains leverage over Iraq through control of vital river waters.

The United States has always been fully supportive of Turkey and of all action taken against “the PKK”.

Makhmour Refugee Camp

This is the background to the constant pattern of attacks and threats that are faced both by the refugees in Makhmour, and by the Yazidis in Şengal (Sinjar), who established autonomous control over their region in the aftermath of the genocide carried out against their community by ISIS in 2014. (A Turkish drone [killed](#) another person in Şengal on Tuesday.) Makhmour and Şengal are also both in areas where official top-down control is disputed between the Iraqi state and the Kurdistan Regional Government, who argue that these are part of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. In recent years, both areas have come under pressure from the federal and regional governments as well as suffering repeated, and often fatal, air attacks from the Turkish military. Last year the Iraqi army [attempted to take over Şengal](#). Now it is Makhmour’s turn. As I write camp residents are taking a stand against armed Iraqi soldiers.

Nowhere can better illustrate Kurdish optimism and determination in face of adversity than Makhmour, which established the first practical example of the system of democratic autonomy that was put forward by Öcalan. The camp is home to some 12,000 residents whose families left their ancestral lands in southeast Turkey in 1994. They came to Iraq as refugees to escape the Turkish state, which was destroying villages and forcing all villagers to collaborate with the state in their attacks on the PKK. Because of their political sympathy with the Kurdish Freedom Movement, it took many years of protest before they were accepted as eligible for refugee status and given more than limited help by UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency. Before 1998, when they were found space on the inhospitable ground of Makhmour, the refugees had been forced to shift their camp eight times. As well as

physical hardships, they had to overcome attempts by the authorities to make them abandon their political convictions, as they set about constructing their camp society on the basis of grassroots democracy.

Makhmour camp is run as an autonomous community according to communal values. It has its own school system, its own basic healthcare structures, and its own practices of community-based rehabilitative justice. It has its own needs-based economy, though its limited size and resources mean that this has to be supplemented by residents taking waged jobs in the surrounding area. People also have to go outside the camp for further education or more advanced medical care.

However, since July 2019, the Kurdistan Regional Government has imposed an embargo on the camp, severely restricting movement in and out. Even someone with official paperwork proving their vital need to travel may not be allowed out, and people have died after being refused access to hospital. (The excuse given for this illegal mass punishment was the murder in Hewlêr [Erbil] of a Turkish diplomat, which was blamed on the PKK. Two Kurds were sentenced to death for the murder after severe torture and a show trial.)

The Iraqi government has made moves to fence in the camp before, at the end of December 2021. They were then persuaded to back off by angry residents, but [erected](#) watch towers on the access road.

As on that occasion, the Iraqi army arrived without warning last Saturday. Besides soldiers and policeman, they brought armed vehicles, heavy weapons, and construction machinery, and they blocked all entrances to the camp allowing no one to leave. The people of Makhmour of all generations came out to protest their camp being turned into a prison, and also called on the United Nations, who are still legally responsible for the refugees although they have given no assistance since 2018, to prevent what was happening. The Iraqi army fired shots at the camp, injuring a young man. On Monday a delegation from the camp [met with representatives of the Iraqi government](#), and on Tuesday a United Nations delegation visited the camp for the first time since 2014, but on Thursday the army [tried to block off wells](#) that

supply the camp with water, and the siege and the resistance continue.
Makhmour embodies the moto, Resistance is Life.

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