

# When is a war not a war? – a weekly news review

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If artillery hits a village and there is no international media there to record it, does it count as war? From the perspective of the Kurds in all four parts of Kurdistan, the war against them never stops, but only occasionally is this caught in the media spotlight. A response from a foreign government is an even rarer phenomenon. A response that goes beyond empty expressions of concern is almost unheard of.

The war against the Kurds cannot be dismissed with Neville Chamberlain's infamous phrase as 'a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing'. Kurds have fought alongside western troops, and Kurdish

women fighters have provided a focus for western cameras. Nevertheless, this war is not taking place immediately on Europe's doorstep, and concrete barriers and the EU's rights-crushing deal with Turkey now ensure that few of its victims can cross Europe's threshold.

Even the media coverage that was given to the war in the past can serve to lessen its impact now. It is not news anymore. Unrest in the Middle East has become a norm, no longer deserving of comment – as though it were integral to that part of the world and the result of an innate failure of its peoples and cultures, rather than being fed by imperialist competition. The fighting has gone on for so long that it has come to be regarded as mere background noise.

But the principal reason why this particular war has been allowed to slip from the international agenda is that it doesn't fit neatly into the pervading political narratives favoured by liberal democracy, and it is not perceived as posing imminent danger to western nations or the western way of life.

So, what does this invisible war look like, and how did it manifest itself this week?

Today, Baghdad is hosting a regional summit to discuss stability, so it seems appropriate to begin in north Iraq – or South Kurdistan. Not that the summit will include representatives from the Kurdish groups who follow the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. There is never a place allowed for them at international negotiating tables. There will be political leaders there from Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, the UAE, and – although the intention is to discuss regional cooperation without foreign intervention – also from France. And there will be representatives from the European Union and the United Nations. Kurds have attempted to ask France to put their case. The Kurdish Democratic Council in France (CDK-F) has called on President Macron not to forget the Kurds and the debt owed to them for defeating ISIS in the name of humanity, and to 'to give special importance to the Kurdish question and the Yazidi question'.

Macron will also visit Hewlêr (Erbil) in South Kurdistan and meet with President Nechirvan Barzani and leading members of the Kurdistan Regional Government, and with Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). As increasingly close allies of Turkey, the Barzanis' perspective will be rather different to that of the CDK-F.

The CDK-F statement concludes, 'The recognition of the autonomous administration of Shengal [or Sinjar] will be the only way to secure the stabilization of Shengal and the return of the Yazidis to their lands.' But no international power has shown any interest in letting the Yazidis control their own lives – even though this would be allowed for in the Iraqi constitution, and the Iraqi government already recognises the Yazidi self-defence force under the Popular Mobilization Units umbrella. Instead, a US and UN backed agreement, supported by Turkey, would hand control over to the Iraqi government and the KDP dominated Kurdistan Regional Government – the very powers that abandoned the Yazidis to genocidal attack by ISIS just seven years ago. Despite increasing international recognition of the genocide, 200,000 or more displaced Yazidis don't feel safe to return to their still-ruined homeland; and there is no internationally coordinated search for the 2763 abducted women and children who are still unaccounted for, and no mechanism to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The Yazidis have every reason not to rely on others for their safety. They had already been victims of many previous persecutions and genocidal attacks, and even after the ISIS genocide brought them to the world's attention, they have suffered especial oppression under the Turkish occupation of Afrîn. Shortly before Turkey's most recent attacks on Şengal, which I described last week, the International Centre for the Study of Violent Extremism published a report entitled 'Five Years of Airstrikes: Turkish Aggression and International Silence in Sinjar, 2017-2021'. This observes, unsurprisingly, that, 'Alongside other security threats and the lack of basic services, Turkish drone and airstrikes also appear to be one of several reasons why Yezidis are reluctant to return to their homes in Sinjar.'

There has still been no significant international response to last week's Turkish airstrikes. The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq condemned

the loss of civilian lives and called for an investigation, but their statement only talks about taking 'necessary precautions' during military operations so as to protect civilians. It doesn't mention that the targets of the airstrikes were actually a functioning hospital and a car taking leading Yazidi representatives to meet the delegation of the Iraqi Prime Minister, who was paying his respects at the major massacre site of Kocho in the first prime-ministerial visit to the region since the Saddam era.

If Turkey intended these attacks as a means to enforce their will and ensure that neither the KDP nor the Iraqi government made concessions to the Yazidis, they will have been satisfied by the lack of response from both, including the absence of any mention of the assassinated Yazidis when the Iraqi Prime Minister gave his speech shortly after their car was hit.

The US response to this war crime by their NATO ally was so brief and insubstantial it might have been better if they had not responded at all.

Media coverage of the attacks was minimal and misleading. A short report in France 24 from Agence France-Presse reduced them to 'operations against Kurdish separatists'. There is no reminder that the people being hit were the survivors of the genocide that had once headlined news reports, or that the 'officials' killed helped lead the fight against ISIS. The word Yazidi appears only three times compared to ten mentions of the PKK. It has been left to concerned activists and to NGOs such as the Christian Peacemakers Team to provide a more balanced account and attempt to draw attention to the seriousness of what is happening. Predictably, the only condemnation within Turkey's political sphere came from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and associated groups.

Meanwhile, with even less international attention, Turkish bombardments continue to pound the mountains of north Iraq as Turkey seeks to increase their military foothold in the region. This is the area where the PKK have their bases. It is also the location of village communities where the attacks have destroyed the rural economy and people have been forced to flee in search of safety. Turkey's current operations began on 23 April, and the PKK's report of their fourth month under attack states that they had been bombed every day

from land and air, and that the Turkish forces had used chemical gas 65 times.

Turkish reports of these actions – which are often quoted uncritically by international media if they bother to cover what is happening at all – demonstrate the way other countries are used to legitimise Turkish aggression. They never fail to mention that the PKK is listed as a terrorist organisation by the United States and the European Union.

This Tuesday, the Turkish military moved their focus to a rural district of Sulaimani Province, near the Iranian border and over 200km from Turkey, where they destroyed orchards and terrified local farmers. There were no casualties on that occasion, but the previous Friday two tourists from Mosul who were visiting Duhok Province were added to the civilian death toll.

While the PKK oppose everything that the Taliban stand for, they can also take encouragement from the example of the defeat of a NATO army by a local force that has none of NATO's advanced technology. PKK commander, Murat Karayilan, has observed, 'As things currently stand, not only has the United States been defeated in Afghanistan, all of NATO has been defeated. In other words, modern technology has been defeated. Today the same situation is valid for the fight being waged in Kurdish lands. What matters is a people's will, its beliefs and its spirit of enterprise.'

It is difficult to know what is happening in the Iraqi mountains. This time, Turkey has been wary about declaring their ambitions beforehand, but there does not appear to have been much for them to celebrate. Firat News Agency reported last Saturday that Turkey has been sending Village Guards into Iraq to replace their losses and that many Village Guards have resigned. (Village Guards are local militias, mainly Kurds, who work for the Turkish state and against the PKK. People join for pay, power and privileges, including immunity for criminal activity, and through coercion. They are part of Turkey's war against the Kurds within Turkish borders.)

Turkey has also been increasing its attacks in Syria, with every day bringing reports of new bombardments. It is easy to become accustomed to reports of

attacks and stop noticing them. Rojava Media Centre puts out tweets giving the news as it happens. This last week they put out fifteen tweets reporting on attacks by 'Turkish occupation-backed mercenary forces' and many of these tweets refer to attacks in more than one location. Last Sunday, a Turkish drone hit a car outside the House of the Wounded in Qamishlo.

Ciwan Mele Eyup, co-chair of the civil council of Til Temir, explained to Firat News Agency what these attacks mean for those living through them: "There is not a day on which the population is not attacked with tanks and grenades. Houses and fields are set on fire... Many people lost their lives, dozens were injured... The Turkish state has sent jihadists from organizations such as al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and ISIS to take Til Temir. That has been prevented so far. The Christian, Kurdish and Arab populations are resisting together. Women and men are resisting together. Now the Turkish state itself is besieging Til Temir. The people continue to defend themselves." Russian forces have set up a base, but 'The Turkish attacks are tacitly accepted.' Rojava Information Centre reports that many people have been forced to leave the area. Around 100 families have gone to Newroz camp near Derik, while many others have moved to Heseke, where there are already thousands of IDPs.

Turkey has just removed a section of their border wall, leading to fears over what they might bring through.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria warned on Monday that 'The recent Turkish escalation against areas in Manbij, as well as in Tal Tamr and its countryside, and its targeting of areas in Qamishlo, indicates a clear desire to strike the stability of our regions, as well as giving a clear opportunity for the return of ISIS'. They call for action from international institutions, and especially from Russia and the United States as guarantors of the ceasefire that Turkey routinely breaks.

In the Turkish-occupied canton of Afrîn, where a brutal politics is mixed in with an equally brutal basic criminality, the last two months have seen an increase in kidnappings – 37 in July and 42 in August. The Kurdish National Council

(ENKS), which was established with the support of the Barzanis' KDP and has close links with Turkey, has been using false promises of a secure life and the return of their property to persuade some Afrîn IDPs to abandon their self-governed camps in Shehba and return to Afrîn. Some of these returnees are among those being kidnapped.

And, of course, Turkey's war against the Kurds is also carried out on Turkish soil, both militarily and otherwise. Military actions against PKK guerrillas shut off whole regions and set fire to the hillsides. This week, a helicopter attack started a fire in Şırnak, and fires started by last week's military action in Dersim (Tunceli) continued to rage, consuming tens of hectares of land. In both regions, local people are prevented, on 'security' grounds, from attempting to extinguish the blaze.

In the political war, windows are closing on any possibility of parliamentary progress. Next Thursday, Turkey's Constitutional Court will rule on the HDP's request for a postponement to the case that calls for the party's closure. The HDP's lawyers need the extra time to read the huge number of documents that make up the case against them. The 'Kobanê Case', in which 108 party members face possible life imprisonment, reconvenes in three weeks.

Meanwhile, Turkey's Human Rights Association reports even more violations of the rights of political prisoners. Prisoners are being asked, 'Do you love Öcalan?' or 'Are you a Muslim?' and if they give the wrong answer they can be kept in prison for bad behaviour for as much as eight months after the end of their sentence.

Former HDP MP, Leyla Güven, and eight other women political prisoners are facing an investigation for singing in Kurdish. Investigation minutes obtained by JinNews state that they "loudly performed verbal halay [a folk dance] in an incomprehensible language" and "sang anthems in an incomprehensible language."

An accompanying propaganda war is aimed at both local and international audiences. The father of a PKK fighter told Mezopotamya News Agency how

the Turkish state tries to force his family to join the sit-in in front of the HDP building in Diyarbakir to claim she was kidnapped and demand her return. His family has suffered a long history of arrest and oppression and their home has been raided so many times they no longer bother to repair the door.

No doubt, propaganda such as this sit-in helps western leaders ignore the inconvenient aggressions being committed by their strategically positioned NATO ally, trading partner, and border policeman.

However, even in their self-interest these leaders are short-sighted. As the Autonomous Administration points out, the instability resulting from Turkey's actions is creating 'a clear opportunity for the return of ISIS'. The impacts of that will not be confined to a distant Middle East.