

Waiting on America and Russia – a weekly news review

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On Monday, President Erdoğan announced that Turkey was planning another invasion of northern Syria – though, of course, he didn't use that word. He stated that, "We will soon take new steps regarding the incomplete portions of the project we started on the 30 km-deep safe zone established along our southern border. As soon as the Turkish armed forces complete its intelligence & security preparations, these operations will begin." Erdoğan was referring to his plan to occupy the northern strip of the region that is controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and populate it with Syrian refugees from other parts who are currently in Turkey; a plan that he advertised to the world at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019. That 30 km strip would include most of North and East Syria's major cities, more than half the region's population, most of the area in which there is a Kurdish majority, nearly all the region's main Christian settlements, major ISIS prisons, the crossing into the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and much of the region's most fertile land.

In their October 2019 invasion, which followed the UN announcement, Turkey captured a section of this strip going from Serekaniyê to Girê Spî. Far from being "safe zones", Turkish occupied areas have become some of the most dangerous places in the world, where rival militias indulge in extortion rackets and gratuitous violence, and ISIS is free to plot further attacks.

Turkey's 2019 invasion into Syria was enabled by Donald Trump, who – after a phone call with Erdoğan – withdrew American troops and made it clear that the US would not intervene if Turkey attacked. Turkey's invasion of Afrîn, the previous year, was given the go-ahead by Russia, which controls much of western Syrian airspace, while the US largely controls the northeast.

The 2019 invasion ended with two ceasefire agreements: one between Turkey and Russia and the other between Turkey and the United States. Both stipulated withdrawal of North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from the border strip, but maintained a role for Turkish military patrols. Russian and Syrian forces were in control on the west, and American forces in the East. Russia and the US are expected to act as guarantors of these agreements and both have bases along the frontlines with Turkey. As Rojava Information Centre explained to me, "an invasion without at least one of these powers pulling out of their current bases could not happen". When Erdoğan threatened another major attack in October last year, both the United States and Russia made clear that this would not be acceptable, and no attack took place.

This time, a mealy-mouthed statement from the US State Department on Tuesday said that they expected Turkey to keep to their 2019 ceasefire agreement; but the statement still repeated Erdoğan's favourite mantra about Turkey having "legitimate security concerns". We can't know what discussions are taking place behind closed doors, but there has been no public guarantee to defend the region should Turkey decide to call America's bluff and attack. Al Monitor reports that a "Biden administration official" told them "the White House is treating Erdogan's threat as serious". They note that Pentagon Press Secretary, John Kirby, stated on Thursday that "US military officials are in daily contact with Kurdish-led forces in Syria", but that "he was not aware of any senior-level military dialogue with the Turkish armed forces over the issue." President Biden knows that being seen, like Trump, to abandon America's Kurdish allies would not be popular with the US Congress or the US public.

While Russia has no wish to see Damascus lose more territory to Turkey, they are always happy to see increased tension between Turkey and the US, and happy for Turkey to weaken the Autonomous Administration of North and

East Syria and crush hopes for a more democratic Syrian future. There has been no official Russian Statement.

Al Monitor reports that Ilham Ahmed, president of the executive committee of the Syrian Democratic Council, told them that “as of Thursday morning, neither US nor Russian officials had offered assurances of security in response to Turkey’s threats.”

Assad’s Syrian Government has protested to the UN that Turkey’s plans would constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Syrian Foreign Minister wrote, “what the Turkish regime is doing through its seeking to establish a so-called ‘safe zone’ on Syrian territory is an aggressive and a colonial activity. The government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan seeks to establish an explosive area inside Syria and to continue sponsoring, arming and operating armed terrorist organizations to be used against the Syrian people,” Neither the Syrian government nor the UN has the means to stop this happening.

The press spokesperson for the SDF explained on Thursday that, despite propaganda reports from Turkey about troops massing on the front lines, “there are no visible movements at the front. Nothing has changed in the positions of the international troops either. There is no retreat. However, there has recently been an increase in movements in the Russian bases at Kobanê and Ain Issa” But he also pointed out that northern Syria already contains “more than 50,000 Turkish soldiers, tens of thousands of mercenaries and thousands of tanks”. In this atmosphere of dangerous uncertainty, they are preparing themselves for an attack that could come at any time, and which could be local or broadbased, soon or delayed. Erdoğan’s much-anticipated statement after Thursday’s National Security Council meeting provided no further clues.

Every concession made to Turkey, every acknowledgement of their “legitimate security concerns”, every Turkish ceasefire breach that passes without a response from the ceasefire guarantors, strengthens Erdoğan’s hand and emboldens the Turkish government to take a step further in their war against the Kurds. Instead of bowing to Turkish threats, international leaders and

organisations could take the initiative and push for a return to peace talks. An important contribution to this would be the removal of the PKK from terrorism lists – in line with the Belgian court ruling that they are a party to a civil war, not a criminal organisation – so giving support to the PKKs longstanding demands for a negotiated settlement.

Power by any means

For Erdoğan, the most important consideration has always been his own power and aggrandisement, and, increasingly – as his support falters – his survival. There have been times when he thought he could find the way to success through a peace dialogue with the PKK, but, since turning his back on this in 2015, he has sought to win support by promoting an increasingly virulent anti-Kurdish nationalism. He has built on the foundational ethnic nationalism of the Turkish Republic, and given it a new Islamist dimension. For Erdoğan, attacking the Kurds has become synonymous with building popular support, and, as the next election looms, his foreign policy is being increasingly driven by the domestic agenda. A khaki election would suit him nicely, especially as the main opposition alliance, led by the Republican People's Party (CHP), would be expected to tail-end his war, so muffling opposition rhetoric, and cutting across their potential to attract Kurdish voters. Of course. Erdoğan would also like to be seen as a world statesman and a victorious leader.

In the pursuit of power, everything becomes a source of possible new opportunities. The week before last, Erdoğan jumped on the application by Sweden and Finland to join NATO, attempting to use Turkey's veto to extract a long list of concessions – from the extradition of Kurds who have taken refuge in the Nordic countries, to unlocking sanctioned arms deals with the United States. Turkish demands for lifting the veto take a similar broad scattergun approach to their attacks on domestic opponents, and are equally careless of detail. One of the men whose extradition was demanded has been dead for seven years – just as the original indictment for the closure of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) included people no longer alive.

There has been strong reaction against the demands for extradition. A letter, signed by leaders of Swedish organisations for writers, journalists, and publishers, called on their country to stand up for freedom of expression and not allow Erdoğan to impose his rules on Sweden. (This comes as a new bill submitted to the Turkish Parliament on Thursday, seeks to bring in prison sentences for dissemination of “false” information.)

However, one of Turkey’s salvos may hit the target. Delegations from Sweden and Finland have been to Turkey for talks, after which the Turkish spokesperson claimed to have observed “a positive attitude towards lifting of embargo regarding defence industry products”. The two countries have had an embargo on arms exports to Turkey since Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria in 2019.

Last week’s invasion threat exploits the fact that the war in Ukraine has increased the importance of their relationship with Turkey for both the US and Russia. It also reflects Turkey’s failure to get the victory they are looking for in their war in northern Iraq.

On Tuesday, CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, who hopes to replace Erdoğan as president, claimed that Erdoğan is using NGOs to transfer money to the United States, so as to be ready to flee when he loses the election. And Erdoğan has, as always, promised to sue. To him, this is a double irritant – both the accusation of smuggling money out of the country, and the implication that he will not win. As opinion polls continue to give Erdoğan cause for concern he may be tempted to ever more aggressive actions.

Constant attack

Even while Kurds wait and watch, wondering what part of their lives and land NATO or Russia might deem expendable in the cause of their imperial struggles, the current situation is already far from peaceful or stable. In Syria, Turkey breaks the 2019 ceasefires every day, while the US and Russia look on. And in Iraq, Turkey is carrying out an invasion in the northern mountains with NATO’s blessing.

Rojava Information Centre reports that “In the last month, Turkey has dramatically increased shelling on [North and East Syria], killing at least 2 civilians & injuring 13.” But the impact goes way beyond these direct casualties. The constant fear of attack makes the development of real stability impossible, while the targeting of infrastructure, and especially water supply, is devastating – including contributing to the massive rise in wheat prices announced last week. Meanwhile, more evidence has come out of Turkish Secret Service involvement in January’s attempted prison bust in Heseke – one of the ISIS prisons that would fall within Erdoğan’s 30 km zone.

Last week in Iraq, a civilian was fatally wounded in another Turkish drone strike on Maxmur Refugee camp; Turkish planes bombed a PKK car, and when, four hours later, local villagers tried to take the injured to hospital, Turkish drones bombed their car, killing all five people; and Turkish planes bombed a village in Duhok, killing two children. Media attached to the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which supports Turkey, attempted to claim that these last deaths were the consequence of a PKK explosive, but the K24 reporter was corrected by a witness live on air.

In the Iraq mountains, the PKK report that eight of their guerrillas were killed by Turkish chemical weapons in April; and Turkey launched a large-scale offensive in Zap and Metîna on Wednesday night, with an air attack followed by a ground assault. This war has NATO support – and most people have never heard of it.

Americanisation

Dependence on the protection and whims of the imperial powers leaves North and East Syria with a very uncertain future. But even beyond the security concerns, and the consequent instabilities, this dependence has a corrosive influence on the region’s ability to establish and maintain the independent and revolutionary social structures that are the essence of the Rojava revolution and that have brought hope to people all over the world.

PKK guerrillas may be able to hold out against the Turkish army from their mountain tunnels in Iraq, but defending towns and open countryside without

control of the airspace is a very different matter. Without US air support and US weapons, the YPG and SDF could not have beaten ISIS. Whatever concerns the Autonomous Administration may have had about their growing reliance on allies who they knew were only there for their own interests and could not be relied on long term, it was a clear case of better red-white-and-blue than dead.

In every place where the United States becomes involved, it tries to bend society to conform to its capitalist ideals and to become integrated into its economic empire. The fight against ISIS brought together the unlikely alliance of neoliberal America with organisations that are trying to establish a society that defines itself according to the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan and in opposition to capitalism. Neoliberal America was not going to sit back and allow this alternative society to flourish, and their interventions are calculated to ween it away from radical ideas and practices and bring it into the neoliberal fold.

America's repeated, and doomed, attempts to set up some sort of power-sharing arrangement between the organisations that established the radical social structures, and the much smaller conservative organisations that oppose them, are emblematic of this. Kurdish unity sounds a positive thing, but not if it is a tool for diluting social change. At the same time, the United States has done nothing to help the Autonomous Administration achieve international recognition.

On the other side of the coin, Autonomous Administration leaders can themselves be tempted to tone down their radicalism in order to secure US approval, and this can have a real effect on priorities. In external relations, the courting of liberal elites may be at the expense of links with the people and organisations needed to form a mass solidarity movement. The Administration needs both.

The problem of the boundaries of realpolitik, was demonstrated in some of the hype around Gayle Lemmon's book about the women fighters in Kobanê, and can be seen in the uncritical promotion of Nadine Maenza. Maenza is rightly recognised as a tireless advocate for North and East Syria in Washington, who is unafraid to speak out against Turkey. Indeed, she is in the region as I write, [talking about Turkish war crimes](#). She is also president of

Patriot Voices, a major Republican lobby group that pushes a conservative agenda and conservative candidates. Patriot Voices is anti-abortion, anti-public healthcare and public and social services in general, and anti-environmental regulations. Maenza is very personable, and is probably very genuine, and she has been welcomed by many in the Kurdish Freedom Movement; but she is no friend of Ocalan's ideology. Her particular interest is religious freedom, but Patriot Voices also praises community organisation and the shrinking of the state; however, for them, this is to make space for the dominance of business interests, not grassroots power.

Even where US help is indispensable, it is still possible for this to be accompanied by a critical awareness of all that this entails, and by resistance to the social changes it seeks to impose. If this resistance is left to an afterthought, it will be too late. The Autonomous Administration argue that their ideas could form the basis for a new Syria, but President Assad is not prepared to relinquish his centralised power, and he has Russia's backing – so all forces seem to be working against the survival of this vital social experiment. However, every day that it survives, and continues to put its ideas into practice, strengthens the struggle for a better way of living everywhere.

A song for hope

Last week, imprisoned Kurdish singer, Nûdem Durak, sang to the world through her prison phone-call. Durak, who was given a nineteen-year sentence for singing Kurdish political songs, is suffering from poor health, despite her young age, and fears losing her voice in prison without access to proper health care. This heartless oppression, and Durak's stubbornly optimistic resistance, can be seen as a microcosm of the wider Kurdish condition. The campaign to free her has caught the imagination of a growing list of well-known thinkers and artists, bringing hope to her and to others.