

100 years of Turkish betrayal – a weekly news review

The Treaty of Lausanne set the scene for Kurdish oppression, but it was the duplicity of Turkey's founding fathers and national heroes that put that oppression into motion. Beginning with the Kurdish conference that marked 100 years since the Lausanne treaty, this week's News Review looks at the national question, the significance of Turkey's National Pact, and the betrayal of the Kurds immediately following the treaty's signing, before going on to look at more modern betrayals, the crisis in the CHP, more crackdowns by the Turkish state, ecocide within and outwith Turkey, Salafist attacks in Iran, and two demonstrations in Europe.

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Last Saturday, the Swiss city of Lausanne was bright with red, yellow, and green flags as thousands of Kurds processed up the streets from the lake. Their destination was the Palais de Rumine, a flamboyant building that has provided the canton with a centre of learning and culture since early last century. In homage to its renaissance ambitions, the palace was constructed in the Florentine Style. In design, it celebrates the great cultural achievements of the Italian city states, but the palace has become famous as the location of the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, which divided the former Ottoman Empire into modern nation states. This was the treaty that gave birth to the Republic of Turkey, that introduced the concept of ethnic population exchange, that allowed the world to forget the Armenian genocide, and that left the Kurdish population of the empire divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. In each of those states, and also in Iran, whose Kurdish population had been separated from other Kurdish lands by an international border since the seventeenth century, Kurds have been subjected to persecution.

A Kurdish conference

Saturday's march and demonstration protested a treaty that has been blamed for 100 years of suffering – while also celebrating the defiant resistance of Kurdish culture. It was accompanied by a conference that brought together Kurds from all four Kurdish regions and that ended with a [set of proposals](#) for remedying the destruction that was begun 100 years ago. The proposals for international organisations have little chance of finding a response in a world where the Kurds have no leverage and where even the structures established to promote international order, such as the United Nations, have proved impotent. However, the document as a whole demonstrates the Kurdish Freedom Movement's attempt to balance the conflicting demands for Kurdish independence and for multicultural harmony, and the current reality of the hundred-year-old international borders.

The conference proposals attempt to combine “Kurdistan National Unity” with a recognition that the different parts of Kurdistan should all be free to choose what form self-determination should take in their own region, which could be full independence or regional autonomy. In line with existing movements and developments, it states that “The Kurdish regions divided within the borders of Turkey and Syria should be officially recognised as Kurdistan and accepted with their own self-determined status within Turkey and Syria.” And it makes clear that “Kurdistan regions should not interfere in each other's internal affairs, and the political administrations of South Kurdistan [Kurdistan Region of Iraq] and Rojava Kurdistan [North and East Syria] should work towards removing all barriers and establish political, economic, social and cultural ties.”

For now, though, those barriers remain closed from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's side. And, although representatives from the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which dominates the government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, were invited to take part in the conference, they refused to attend. They do not accept the concept of unity in diversity and prefer to ignore or misrepresent the conference.

The national question

Conflicts around the national question do not make for easy answers. Nation state formation emphasises shared values and culture to the exclusion of other groups. In a world of nation states, Kurds have been an oppressed minority in all the states they inhabit, but how could a state based on Kurdish ethnicity ensure the fair treatment of its non-Kurdish minorities and guarantee that Kurds did not simply exchange being the oppressed for being the oppressor? For followers of Öcalan's philosophy, the nation state is seen as inherently problematic, and answers are sought in radical grassroots democracy that side-lines state structures and can make links across state boundaries without formally dismantling them. However, this democracy is vulnerable to state powers that regard it as a challenge and that can crush what has been created – as we saw so disastrously in North Kurdistan/south-east Turkey. This grassroots democracy is deliberately inclusive of different ethnicities and religions, but this sort of positive action can risk reinforcing ethnic division. Kurdish unity against oppression is important, but cannot be used to suppress debate over other political issues that have a crucial impact on people's lives. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria attempts to implement Öcalan's ideas on grassroots democracy and an economy guided by community needs. A forced unity between the current Administration and KDP backed groups – as attempted unsuccessfully by the United States – could weaken and undermine the political philosophy that has made the Autonomous Administration a source of hope, not just for the region but for the whole world.

These are huge issues and there is no space to examine them more clearly here, but any responses to Lausanne and proposals for implementing a different future have to be conceived and understood against this background.

Turkey's founding text

While Kurds regard Lausanne as the harbinger of 100 years of oppression, for most Turkish politicians it is celebrated as a victory. Mehmet Bayrak [observes in Yeni Yaşam](#) that the treaty is treated by Turkey as a sacred text. Kemal

Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the Republican People's Party (CHP), the descendent of the party of Turkey's founding father, Kemal Atatürk, [called](#) for the 24 July, the anniversary of the treaty, to be a public holiday.

President Erdoğan [described](#) the treaty as "one of the turning points in our history", but at the same time as celebrating it, he also wants more: "While resolutely defending the rights we gained with the Treaty of Lausanne, we will strengthen our country's gains with new moves."

The National Pact

The treaty was the product of many months of negotiations, and despite the bargaining power gained from the new military victories by the Turkish side against Greece and the other Allied Powers, all parties had to make compromises. As he has made clear, Erdoğan would like to reverse those compromises and move Turkey nearer to the boundaries delineated in the National Pact – the demands agreed in 1919-20 that formed the basis of Turkey's Lausanne negotiations. The National Pact [stipulated](#) that "the whole of those parts, whether within or outside the [1918] armistice-line, which are inhabited by an Ottoman Moslem majority, united in religion, in race and in aim, imbued with sentiments of mutual respect for each other and of sacrifice, and wholly respectful of each other's racial and social rights and surrounding conditions form a whole which does not admit of division for any reason in truth or in ordinance."

That "Ottoman Moslem majority" was comprised of both Turks and Kurds, and many Kurds had been persuaded that they were part of a joint struggle for a sovereign Islamic Turkey. There was no separate Kurdish representation at the negotiations in Lausanne and some Kurdish politicians were included in the Turkish delegation. İsmet İnönü, who led the negotiations for Turkey and would become the republic's first prime minister and second president, [observed in his memoirs](#), "in our speeches in Lausanne, we defended our national causes as a nation called 'we Turks and Kurds' and had them accepted".

Betrayal

But the ink was hardly dry on the treaty when the Kurds discovered that they had been tricked and that the new Turkish state that they had helped to create had no intention of showing them mutual respect, or even allowing Kurdishness to be recognised. The republic's first constitution, agreed in April 1924, named all the republic's citizens 'Turks', and excluded non-Turkish speakers from becoming parliamentary deputies; and in 1925 İnönü [made the government's position brutally clear](#): "We must Turkify the inhabitants of our land at any price and we will annihilate those who oppose the Turks or 'le Turquism'."

The new nation state attempted to consolidate its people through a form of ethnic nationalism that allowed assimilation to Turkishness but disparaged those who refused to assimilate. This approach has inspired a century of cultural oppression that has included large-scale deportations and massacres, as well as the outlawing of Kurdish culture, and restrictions on the use of Kurdish language. Kurdish resistance has been met by brutal group punishment and further oppression.

The Treaty of Lausanne buried the idea of Kurdish autonomy that had been raised by the still-born Treaty of Sèvres three years earlier, and it legitimised the emergence of the Turkish republic. It set the scene for Kurdish oppression, but it was the duplicity of Turkey's founding fathers and national heroes that put that oppression into motion.

Duplicity and betrayal have formed a recurring theme in Turkish political action with respect to the Kurds. Government promises during the 2013-15 peace talks with Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK were torn up when Erdoğan's politics underwent a volt face after he witnessed the growth of Kurdish autonomy in Syria and lost his overall majority in the June 2015 election thanks to the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). And duplicity has become a standard component of Turkey's politicised justice system.

The CHP

Today's CHP has followed in the footsteps of Atatürk in getting support from the Kurds, and turning their backs when that support is no longer needed. HDP voters who voted tactically for CHP mayors in Istanbul and Ankara, found themselves shunned by the mayors they had put into office. In the recent presidential elections, the HDP campaigned hard for votes for Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. They wanted to put an end to Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian one-man rule, but HDP co-chairs had met and talked with Kılıçdaroğlu, whose campaign portrayed him as the honest politician. It came as a shock to Kurdish voters – and also to Kılıçdaroğlu's own party colleagues and coalition partners – when the leader of the far-right Victory Party, Ümit Özdağ, let it be publicly known, in a television interview on 17 July, that he had [made a secret deal with Kılıçdaroğlu](#). This stipulated that Özdağ would endorse Kılıçdaroğlu's presidential candidacy in the second-round vote in exchange for his party being given three ministerial posts, including the Minister of the Interior, and the head of the National Intelligence Agency (MIT). This claim was eventually corroborated by Kılıçdaroğlu. Özdağ would have made sure to have impeded any possibility of releasing Kurdish political prisoners or restarting peace talks, and under his fascistic nationalism, MIT could have been expected to have come down even harder against the Kurds.

Anger at this secret deal has gone well beyond the Kurds, but it is just one of the things that has made Kılıçdaroğlu a focus for anger within his party, and thrown the CHP into crisis.

Many party members believe that under a different leader they would have won the elections and the presidency, and there is a widespread conviction that without a new leader they will lose May's regional elections too. But Kılıçdaroğlu has refused to resign. He [told](#) a meeting of the party's mayors "Bring someone who knows the CHP and who doesn't have baggage, and I will immediately resign" – a response that has left all leading party members tainted with the accusation of corruption. He has also [cast aspersions](#) on unspecified journalists with accusations of receiving payments for exposing the CHP's internal woes. Fuel was poured on the CHP crisis by a [leaked](#)

[video](#) of a Zoom meeting of leading party figures, including Istanbul mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, discussing possibilities for change within the party.

More crackdowns in Turkey

Even after a secure election victory, and with the main political opposition in disarray, Erdoğan has continued his attacks on journalists and on freedom of speech. 24 July is [Press Freedom Day](#) in Turkey, commemorating the end of strict censorship in 1908. But there is little to celebrate. Indeed, the very next day, [five more journalists were detained](#), one of whom was arrested in the evening for posting a tweet on the reappointment of a prosecutor who had earlier indicted 18 Kurdish journalists on “terrorism” charges. This tweet was described as “targeting public servants tasked with fighting against terrorism”.

[A new report has found](#) that, in 2022, state bodies blocked access to a record 137,000 pieces of internet content, [Content blocked this year](#) has included 282 pieces relating to a Reuters story about an international corruption report that implicated Erdoğan’s son, Bilal.

In other crackdowns, a nature and culture festival has been [banned](#), with the organisers accusing the authorities of simple “malevolence”. A lawyer’s planned protest walk from Istanbul to Ankara to highlight the call for Kurdish language rights was [prevented](#) before he could take a step. And four family members, including a 16-year-old shepherd, were [beaten and tortured](#) by soldiers in the Cölemler countryside, near the Iraqi border. The Green Left Deputy for Şırnak, Mehmet Zeki İrmez, has [drawn attention to the losses suffered](#) by villagers living in areas declared restricted security zones, where agriculture and animal husbandry are being destroyed.

In Nusaybin, there have been [police raids and detentions](#) resulting in the death of an unnamed woman, possibly linked to the PKK – but all details are unclear and disputed.

Meanwhile Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the National Movement Party, which has been Erdoğan's main coalition partner, [publicly welcomed](#) mafia boss, Sedat Sahin, after his release from eight years in prison.

Ecocide

And, like other states run in the interests of capital – including here in the European Union – the Turkish government is using its security forces to suppress protests against major environmental destruction. In the Akbelen forest, in southwest Turkey, [trees are being torn down to make way for a coal mine](#). The coal will feed local power plants that never went through environmental impact assessments and have caused extensive damage to the surrounding environment and to the people living there, but which have been allowed to continue despite rulings for their closure backed by the European Court of Human Rights. Local villagers have been protecting the forest. They set up a tented vigil a year ago, where they have now been joined by activists and politicians. [Detentions](#) have included the HDP's provincial executives.

More forest is being destroyed by fire, and although many forest fires are the result of accidents exacerbated by climate change, in the Kurdish region of Mount Cûdî, which has been the subject of relentless government deforestation, [blame has been put on the Turkish army](#). There is even a video of joking soldiers claiming “operation accomplished”. There have been no official attempts to stop the rapidly spreading destruction – in fact the Ministry of Forestry does not even acknowledge its existence – and local people are prevented from taking action themselves as this is a military restricted area.

North and East Syria

Turkey's deliberate environmental destruction extends across its borders, with more deforestation in the Iraqi mountains, and with the [reduction of water flows](#) into Syria, and consequently also Iraq. The [state of the region's](#)

[hydroelectric dams](#) gets ever more worrying, and, this week, [thousands of fish are reported to have died](#) as the Khabur river is reduced to stagnant pools.

In North and East Syria's Hasakah district, acute water shortage is the result of Turkey's capture and shutting down of the Alok pumping station in 2019. Bottled water is inadequate and expensive, and the local hospital is overwhelmed by people forced to drink from unsafe sources. The hospital director [told North Press](#), "We receive more than 50 patients daily, most of them are children suffering from diarrhea, vomiting, inflammatory bowel diseases, and stomach diseases."

Turkey continues to carry out military attacks too, in both Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This week, [three people were killed](#) and two more injured by a drone attack on two cars in North and East Syria's Qamishlo Canton.

A Turkish presidential spokesperson [made clear](#) on Sunday that the Turkish government wants to link normalisation of relations with Syria to support from Damascus for Turkish attacks on North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces.

Iran

There have been deliberate forest fires in the Kurdish regions of Iran too. Kolbar News [blames the fires](#) in Marivan on agents of the regime and the IRGC. In the oak forests of Paveh, [fire bullets](#) made of matches and cigarettes have been discovered.

Iran may have fallen off the news schedules, but that only makes it easier for the regime to persecute its citizens – and not only directly. Alongside reports of abductions, interrogations, prison sentences, and violent raids by the security forces, Hengaw Organisation for Human Rights records lethal attacks by Salafi militants who are left to murder with impunity. On 20 July, [a man was killed and his brother severely wounded](#) when armed Salafis came to their home accusing them of "apostasy and blasphemy"; and on Wednesday,

another man was [killed by multiple stab wounds](#) for “desecration of the sanctities of Muslims”. Another report describes Salafists breaking into the home of a media activist and [writing threatening slogans on the walls](#). It was the activist who was arrested.

Hengaw comments that, “‘Salafi’ groups in Kurdistan have been openly resorting to death threats against defenseless residents, justifying their actions through self-proclaimed ‘fatwas’ based on their interpretations of Islam, often disseminated through channels on social media platforms such as Instagram and Telegram. It is important to note that despite the strict oversight of security agencies over civil and political activities in Kurdistan cities, no concrete measures have been taken to address the threats posed by these individuals to the safety and security of people.”

Demonstrations in Europe

I began this week with the demonstration in Lausanne, and I will end with demonstrations outside today’s international forums – the European Union in Brussels, and the Organisation for the Prevention of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) in the Hague.

The [demonstration in the Hague](#) marked the end of a year’s vigil by Xoşnav Ata. Ata has been trying to persuade the OPCW to carry out an independent investigation into accusations of Turkey’s use of chemical weapons against the PKK in Iraq – weapons that are believed to have caused the death of two of his nieces. However, the OPCW will only act if requested to do so by a state – and Lausanne made sure that the Kurds are isolated in a world of nation states.

The [Brussels demonstration](#) brought together trade unionists and people from civil society and local government to draw attention, yet again, to the isolation and torture of Abdullah Öcalan, and to remind the European institutions that if they really stand for human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, then they need to act. The speakers demonstrated the wide support that exists not only for ensuring Öcalan’s human rights and enabling him to take on a key role in

bringing peace to the whole region, but also for learning from and implementing Öcalan's ideas.

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