

# 'Genocide' postponed – a weekly news review

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Another deadline has come and gone, and the Yazidis' autonomous forces are still standing proud in Şengal (Sinjar) in Iraqi Kurdistan. An agreement between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) allotted the Yazidi lands to the joint control of Iraqi forces and the KDP Peshmerga – the two organisations that had abandoned the Yazidis to their fate at the hands of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State or Daesh) in 2014.

This agreement was coordinated by the United Nations and supported by the United States and Turkey, but the Yazidis were not consulted. Now the Yazidis have been forced into a desperate diplomacy to try and retain the autonomy

that they have so painstakingly created. This is a community whose history comprises a succession of attacks on their culture and on their existence. They describe the ISIS genocide as the last of 74 attempts to obliterate them, and they fear that they are being threatened again.

The only people who came to the Yazidis' aid six and a half years ago were the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and Syrian Kurdish fighters of the People's Protection Units/Women's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ). They opened a corridor to allow Yazidis to escape from ISIS into Syria, and they fought to liberate Sinjar (Şengal). But they didn't stop there. They trained the Yazidis in self defence and helped them to establish their own autonomous administration, inspired by the radical democracy that was outlined by Abdullah Öcalan and that has been put into practice by the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES).

Three years ago, once the Yazidis' own security forces had been established, the PKK and YPG/YPJ left Şengal, but that has not prevented 'removal of the terrorist PKK' being used as a fundamental argument in support of the Iraqi-KDP agreement. 1 April, the second deadline given by Iraq for the Yazidi forces to stand down and hand control to the Iraqi army, coincided with the third anniversary of the PKK's departure. After the first deadline, on 11 March, the Yazidis were promised further discussions. Iraq has a federal constitution that allows for autonomous regions, but the Iraqi government appears to have been unmoved by the Yazidis' claims. Again, the Yazidis have called for talks and made clear that, while they look for a negotiated solution, they wouldn't hesitate to defend their autonomy if necessary. Banners read 'Our homeland, our mountains and our weapons are our red line'. Nothing happened on 1 April, but nothing is resolved, and the Yazidis can't afford to relax their watch.

It is only eleven days since another anniversary – the second anniversary of the liberation of the last bit of ISIS-held territory in Deir-ez-Zor. This anniversary was marked by sombre warnings about growing threats from ISIS sleeper cells. The cells target community leaders and people working with AANES, and their attacks are aimed at causing instability and turning different ethnic groups against each other.

Last week saw a major action to root out an important pole of ISIS organisation in Al Hol detention camp, a tent city of around 62,000 people, mainly made up of the families of fighters who carried out massacres and atrocities such as those committed against the Yazidis in Şengal.

Al Hol camp is a terrifying symbol of the failure of the 'international community'. ISIS is recognised as a threat to the whole world, but no-one will take responsibility for what happens to ISIS prisoners and their families. World leaders who were happy to watch as Kurds and others in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) defeated ISIS with the loss of 11,000 of their own lives, have been insistent that the task of looking after ISIS captives should also fall on the local Autonomous Administration.

Thousands of the men who fought for ISIS are in prison, and many more died in battle. The great majority of the people in Al Hol camp – around 93% – is made up of women and children. But some of these women have proved themselves every bit as committed and brutal as their husbands. And there are also ISIS operatives who have infiltrated the camp in the guise of civilians. During the 2019 Turkish invasion, when the Autonomous Administration was forced to reduce the number of guards in Al Hol as they were needed on the battle front, a hard core of people in the camp turned it into an ISIS stronghold where those who don't submit to their rules are severely punished – even beheaded.

The Administration has offered amnesties for Syrians who are not accused of serious crimes, but around half the camp inmates are Iraqi, and there are around 10,000 people from other countries. None of these countries will accept responsibility for their nationals. In recent months, the situation in the camp has deteriorated further. Last year, 20 people were murdered there. This year has already seen over 47 murders in just three months.

This hell on earth is home to thousands of children. A report from December stated that 53% of inmates were under twelve – raising huge issues about these children's well-being, and also about future dangers from a generation raised in this cauldron of hate.

This week's action was a response to the threat that the camp poses, and also to calls from camp residents concerned about their own safety. Over 5,000 armed security officers and SDF soldiers combed through the camp. On Friday, at the end of the first stage of their operation, they announced the capture of 125 'sleeper cell members', including twenty organisers. The week's discoveries included tunnels, military equipment, cell phones, computers, and two decomposing bodies. But the statement from the Security Forces also made it clear that this is an 'international problem, which exceeds our energies'. And they warned that, 'The success of our operation created a safer and more stable environment in Al Hol camp. This will not last long without international support. It is now time to seize this opportunity and come up with a long-term solution together.'

While ISIS no longer has a 'caliphate', there are other groups ascribing to a similarly violent interpretation of Islam – and often including former ISIS members – who continue to hold sway over large parts of Syria. In the areas under Turkish occupation, daily life is controlled by militias from these groups who are employed by Turkey as mercenaries. Their brutality is well known in international circles, and equally well ignored. The deliberate cruelty, the contempt for international law, and, also, Turkey's complicity, was highlighted in a Turkish courtroom on the same day as the second anniversary of the defeat of the ISIS 'caliphate', when Çiçek Kobanê was sentenced to life imprisonment.

Çiçek is a Syrian Kurd who was born in Raqqa and lived in Kobanê. Like many other young women, she joined the YPJ to defend her homeland, and in October 2019, during the Turkish attack on Girê Spî and Serê Kaniyê, she was helping the Kurdish Red Crescent when she was wounded and then captured by men from Ahrar al Sham, one of the mercenary militias used by Turkey in its invasion. After her capture, the men shared videos of themselves threatening her with execution and shouting 'to the slaughterhouse'. Çiçek told the court that they twice shot her already damaged leg after her capture, and a subsequent botched operation has left her unable to stand or look after herself.

On top of this abuse, Çiçek – a Syrian citizen – was handed over to Turkish officials who, contrary to all international rules on the treatment of prisoners of war, took her to Turkey and tried her for disrupting the unity and integrity of the Turkish state. As YPJ commander, Newroz Ehmed, told Firat News Agency on Thursday, 'Çiçek Kobanê was defending her own land. She did not harm Turkey's sovereignty as claimed by the Turkish state. She was on the Syrian territory and was taken prisoner there. These gangs are attacking our lands and massacring our people in the occupied areas with brutal methods and engage in human trafficking.' If the logic of this case were applied more generally, a large proportion of Syrian Kurds would be eligible for abduction and sentencing to life imprisonment; and, in fact, Çiçek is not the only person to have been illegally deported and tried in Turkey.

Despite the ceasefire that was supposed to halt the Turkish invasion of Syria, not a day goes by without Turkish artillery attacks, as Turkey continues to try and extend their area of occupation. This last month, over two hundred waves of attacks were recorded in the areas around Afrîn, including Shebha where many of the people displaced from Afrîn have taken shelter. Around Ain Issa, on the strategic M4 highway, daily artillery attacks are interrupted by ground raids, while Russian troops, who are supposed to enforce the ceasefire, just look on. On Monday, thousands gathered for the funeral of eight SDF fighters killed defending Ain Issa, but the SDF claim to have inflicted much greater casualties on the invading militias.

At the same time, Turkey continues its incursions into northern Iraq, hitting villages in the areas controlled by the PKK with aerial bombardments and mortar fire. Last Sunday, it was reported that, at the bequest of Turkey, and to facilitate the Turkish attacks, KDP forces had cut off the roads to and from 53 villages, preventing villagers from reaching their livestock and fields.

This week also brought more positive news from Iraq. On Wednesday, the Iraqi parliament finally agreed the 2021 budget, ending long-running disputes about the federal government's share of oil revenue from the Kurdistan region, and the region's share of federal funds. This will not, of course, solve underlying problems of corruption in the Kurdistan region, which will become

even more obvious as this external excuse for the region's economic difficulties is removed.

In Turkey itself, we have seen more crackdowns on student protests, and growing concerns over the political prisoners who are on hunger strike to demand an end to the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan. And we have even seen a video of government officers confiscating a villager's sheep – an example of everyday harassment and corruption that Firat News Agency explains is not uncommon.

On Wednesday, it was what the HDP has labelled 'political genocide' that was postponed. The Constitutional Court sent the indictment calling for the closure of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) back to the Chief Public Prosecutor, citing 'procedural deficiencies'. The call for the ban on the HDP came from Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which the Turkish government relies on for support. Bahçeli responded to the Constitutional Court's decision by calling for a ban on the Constitutional Court. This battle is far from over, and is, also, only part of the war to prevent the HDP from functioning. A court case against 108 leading party members opens on 26 April. Meanwhile, yesterday evening, deposed HDP MP and human rights defender, Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu, was taken from his flat to start a two-and-a-half year prison sentence. He was pushed and shoved out of the door without even being able to put on his shoes and had to be taken from the courthouse to the hospital as he started to experience chest pains.

If the Turkish nightmare is going to end, then different resistance struggles will have to come together – and officially-ingrained prejudices against the Kurds be overcome. In a press conference called on Wednesday in anticipation of his arrest, Gergerlioğlu made a call to the people of Turkey: "I would like to say something to the Turkish people: the Kurdish question has not been triggered by the Kurdish people, but by the state's actions. It is the other peoples and not the Kurdish people who have to solve this problem. I appeal to the entire society of Turkey: I am not a Kurd. I lost my job because I worked for a solution to the Kurdish question. We have to solve the problem together. It is the children of all of us who are dying. I can be thrown into

prison now; many of our colleagues are already there. However, it will not solve anything".