

For Rojava, “a matter of to be or not to be”- a weekly news review

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On Tuesday, Mazloum Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces, told an online press conference that if Turkey carries out their threatened ground invasion “for us it will be a matter of to be or not to be.” He quoted reports that Turkish preparations were underway and that the militant militias who serve as Turkey’s mercenaries were on high alert and also preparing to invade. This would be Turkey’s fourth land invasion into Syria, and third invasion of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, but Abdi stressed that this time they expect the attacks to be along the entire border. He spoke of over a million people threatened with displacement, and

of the potential loss of all the gains made against ISIS. And, although he noted reports of ISIS plans for further attacks on the detention centres that hold their captured fighters, he also explained that the need to prepare for the threatened invasion meant that his forces had to pause their work with the International Coalition against ISIS. For Abdi, it is quite clear that the statements made by international players are not adequate in the face of Turkey's threats, and that without strong opposition from Russia and the United States an invasion could be just days away.

The same day, Turkey's presidential spokesman, İbrahim Kalın, told a Turkish news channel that Turkey's current military operations would continue and that a ground invasion could begin at any time. Not only would Turkey remain unmoved by statements made by Russia and the United States, but "if there are American, Russian or others' troops at the terrorist points we are targeting, they need to reconsider this." Kalın claimed that they had had permission to use Russian-controlled airspace. He also repeated his government's twisted argument that a Turkish invasion would promote Syrian integrity.

Meanwhile, Turkey has continued to target populated areas with air attacks and artillery, and their mercenaries have attempted to infiltrate territory under the Autonomous Administration. This week has seen relatively few casualties, but anything approaching normal life is impossible. Schools have been closed, leaving 21,000 children without education, and attack targets have included a village hospital and a mosque.

Manbij has been highlighted by Turkey as an initial invasion point (along with Kobanê and Tel Rifaat), and Nûda Reşîd from the command of the Manbij Military Council has described massive troop movements by Turkey and their mercenaries, repeated artillery and air attacks and reconnaissance flights, and six attempted ground attacks by Turkey's mercenaries.

At the same time, there have been further discussions about a possible reconciliation between Turkey and Syria, with reports of continued contacts between their intelligence chiefs. Such a reconciliation would be based on combined opposition to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and to the US

forces that the SDF are working with. The combination of violence and talks is not uncharacteristic of President Erdoğan's diplomacy, and he has demonstrated that he is capable of reversing his position when that suits his plan for power and influence. He made this point clear when he said, on 21 November, that "there is no place for hard feelings in politics." President Assad and his Russian backers have always been ready to exploit Turkish threats to put pressure on the Autonomous Administration to move closer to Damascus, and Russia has been pushing for a Turkish/Syrian reconciliation based on the 1998 Adana Agreement, when Turkey forced Syria to expel the PKK. Assad insists that Turkey must withdraw from Syria and also end their support for the Islamist militias. Fehim Tastekin points out in *al Monitor* that Assad can "rely less on Russian and Iranian protection now that the war in Ukraine has raised the value of Moscow's ties with Ankara and Tehran is grappling with domestic unrest." However, Reuters' sources claimed yesterday that Assad has rejected a proposed meeting. Any agreement with Syria would mean Turkey turning their back on the militias that they are currently supporting and that they are currently preparing for an attack on the Autonomous Administration.

For anyone with illusions in the United Nations, the comments by UN Envoy, Geir Pedersen, make sobering reading. With Turkey preparing for their third unprovoked ground invasion of North and East Syria while shelling civilian homes and infrastructure, Pedersen's message to the Security Council on Tuesday showed no recognition of Turkish aggression. Instead, it painted an unrecognisable picture of mutual escalation in which Turkey and the SDF are equally to blame. This delegitimising of the Autonomous Administration is part of a longer pattern. The UN's Syrian Constitutional Committee, which has not met for six months, engaged with Islamist opposition groups but did not allow the Autonomous Administration a seat at the table.

The Syrian representative, on the other hand, made the position clear: "Syria calls on the [UN Security Council] to compel the Turkish regime to end its illegal military presence on Syrian lands... the pretexts marked by the Turkish regime to justify its attacks on Syrian territories are no longer tricking anyone,

particularly in light of its persistence to back terrorist organisations and to sponsor Daesh and Jabhat al-Nusra [Hayat Tahrir al-Sham].”

Iran

Moving east, we find the revolution in Iran continuing to deepen, despite brutal crackdowns. Human Rights organisations, such as Hengaw, which covers the Kurdish provinces, continue to publish pictures of the murdered and disappeared. In the Kurdish city of Sanandaj, at least 22 people were abducted in ten days.

After the Iranian football team was beaten by the United States and knocked out of the World Cup, Iran’s streets were full of people celebrating the downfall of their national representatives as symbols of the hated regime. Mehran Samak, 27, was shot dead in Bandar Anzali, on the Caspian coast, when he marked the defeat with a celebratory honk on his car horn. Firuz Mirani, a singer from Paveh, was shot in the eyes.

Meanwhile, several high-profile people have been released from detention, which many see as a diversionary tactic by the Iranian Government.

There has been a coordination meeting of three exiled Kurdish Iranian parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (PDKI), Komala, and the Kurdistan Freedom Party (PAK), but this did not include the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), which follows the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. PAK calls for an independent Kurdish state while the others call for some form of autonomy within Iran, so this is a coming together despite an important ideological difference – which makes it all the more disappointing that PJAK does not seem to be included in the discussions.

More positively, the strike movement is growing. Crippling strikes played a crucial role in bringing down the shah in 1978-9, and strikes could have a similar impact on his clerical successors. Steel and automobile workers came out last Saturday, and Sunday saw a nationwide strike by Truckers. Calls for

nationwide strikes and protests from 5-7 December are being widely distributed.

Turkey

The Turkish government has framed its attack on, and potential invasion of, North and East Syria as an anti-terrorist response to the recent bombing in Istanbul, which they quickly blamed on the PKK and the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Kurdish forces that are now incorporated into the SDF and which led the fight against ISIS. While this charge against the PKK and YPG is supported by neither evidence nor logic, and there are powerful reasons for them having nothing to do with such an attack, there is considerable evidence pointing to Turkey's militant Islamist mercenaries, and there are strong suspicions of state involvement. With the almost total erosion of the distinction between the state, and the police and judiciary, the need for independent investigation is glaring. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) had already called for such an investigation. This week, the Republican People's Party (CHP) raised a motion in parliament calling for a parliamentary investigation commission to look into the cause of the bombing. In proposing the motion, they criticised the government's responses to other bombings in recent years: "You did not question the previous attacks. To put it mildly, I say 'You gave way', you did not investigate, you did not do what is necessary, to say the least, you gave way to these massacres." The motion was defeated by the parliamentary majority of the government and its far-right allies, the National Movement Party (MHP).

This week has produced yet more examples of authoritarianism and judicial capture. The Turkish Medical Association was already in the government's sights for its robust criticism of Turkey's Covid response (including the official statistics), when their president called for an independent investigation into allegations of the use of chemical weapons by the Turkish military in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The state responded by putting her in prison, and the MHP has now introduced a draft law calling for the word "Turkish" to be removed from the medical association's name, and for a change in rules that is intended to weaken the association and destroy its independence. These

would revoke association membership for medical workers who have been discharged by presidential decrees, and would lift the mandatory membership requirement for physicians with independent practices.

Political detentions have been a constant concern, but the last two weeks have been exceptionally bad, with hundreds of people rounded up in house raids in different cities. On Wednesday, it was the turn of the Kurdish Women's Movement, with arrest warrants issued for fifty activists and politicians, and house searches carried out across fourteen provinces.

The extreme inhumanity of the Turkish justice system was demonstrated once again with the case of Şadiye Manap, who was released after serving a thirty-year sentence imposed when she was just twenty-four, only to be immediately taken back into custody under a new investigation.

In the latest session of the Kobanê trial, where 108 people, including the HDP's former Central Executive Committee and former co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, face life imprisonment without parole, Demirtaş observed "We can count around a thousand violations in each trial." He also spelt out the sequence of events in 2015 to make it clear that the HDP were not responsible for either the breakdown of the peace talks between the Turkish Government and the PKK, or for the failure to form a government after the June elections. And he explained how, during the peace talks, the Turkish Government tried to use him to undermine the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who is looked up to by millions of Kurds across the globe: "They made an offer for me to take the place of Öcalan. They wanted to fetch out of me a small Öcalan. We are us. Öcalan is Öcalan. Öcalan has the power and the mission to influence politics in the Middle East. And we are actors for a solution as representatives of the people in the parliament."

Öcalan and the PKK

Öcalan's current condition continues to raise concerns. In defiance of international and Turkish law, he is being kept in almost total isolation. Visits to İmralı island prison have always been restricted, and, since 2011, his

lawyers have only been able to see him in the summer of 2019, following a mass hunger strike. His brother has been allowed just three visits since 2014, and the last confirmed contact was a phone call with his brother in March 2021, which was cut short after a few minutes. The one organisation that has the power to insist on a visit is the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), which, after repeated demands from the Kurdish community and their friends, finally went to İmralı in September. However, Öcalan's lawyers have released a statement in which they say, "it has been rumored that during the CPT's visit to İmralı Island in September 2022, Mr. Öcalan did not participate in an interview with the delegation. Unfortunately, we have not been able to confirm this rumor during our meeting with the CPT." CPT rules mean that the report of their visit will only be made public a year or eighteen months later, and then only with Turkey's agreement. Öcalan's lawyers observe, "While we are certainly aware of the conventions and procedures binding the CPT, we also know that this does not prevent the CPT from providing information about the conditions of detention of our clients, from whom we have not heard for 20 months... Its founding values and the international law to which it is bound require the CPT to provide information about its visit to İmralı Island, which is under its competence."

The three other prisoners on İmralı are also held under extreme isolation. This week, the lawyers submitted a request for Veysi Aktaş to attend his father's funeral. They got no response.

Also this week, the Council of Europe's European Court of Human Rights agreed to hear the case submitted by Öcalan's lawyers against Greece. The lawyers argue that Greece breached the European Convention on Human Rights when they handed Öcalan over to the Turkish authorities in 1999.

In Luxembourg, the Court of Justice of the European Union has issued its latest ruling in the case against the inclusion of the PKK on the European Union's Terrorist list. The court's decision annuls the 2014 listing, but rejects the PKK's claim for 2014-2020. The lawyers must now decide whether to appeal. A further ruling for 2020-2021 is expected on 14 December.

The PKK have also applied for the lifting of the ban against them in Germany, which was imposed 29 years ago; however, six months after their lawyers submitted an application to the Federal Minister of the Interior, they have not even received an acknowledgement. In an interview with Yeni Özgür Politika, the lawyers outlined their case: "The PKK ban is outdated. The PKK does not endanger internal security and does not commit crimes in Germany. Nor does it violate the idea of international understanding. Rather, it is Turkey that is trampling on international law by using chemical weapons and targeted killings by drones. The ban no longer has any basis." The anniversary of the ban was marked by a march of thousands in Berlin calling for it to be lifted.

Although Sweden was the first country to outlaw the PKK, its large Kurdish population has generally been relatively free to exercise their freedom of expression; but this is changing as Turkey uses its veto over Swedish entry into NATO to force Sweden to act as Turkey's policeman. Ankara is now demanding an asset freeze for all groups that Turkey considers as terrorists, and, although the wording of the signed memorandum is open to debate, debate can't help when the veto is in Turkey's hands. Kurdish refugee, Mahmut Tat, who was imprisoned for nearly seven years for "membership of the PKK" and sought asylum in Sweden was extradited to Turkey yesterday.

Sunday was the 44th anniversary of the founding of the PKK. The guerrillas in the Iraqi mountains celebrated with a successful counterattack against the invading Turkish forces where they claim to have taken seventeen positions and killed 42 Turkish soldiers. Turkey admits to five dead, and has tried to explain one of the deaths as due to a lightning strike. The latest casualties of Turkey's attacks in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are three villagers who had gone into the mountains to collect grass. A Turkish bomb killed one and injured the other two.

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