

What about the people? – a weekly news review

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Kurdish news is always full of drama and of heroes stepping forward against the odds, but it also tears through the lives of many people whose names we never hear. They are the subject of this week's review. It makes no pretence to be comprehensive, but I hope it gives a sense of the impacts of geopolitics on daily life – and why the resistance struggle is so important. (I was going to write struggles – plural – but they are all connected, and mutually supporting.)

The first of July saw Turkey's official withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention – or, to give it its official title, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. An attempt to stop this on the grounds that withdrawal from an international convention

could not legally be done via Presidential Decree was rejected in a three to two decision by the judges of the 10th Chamber of the Council of State. Meanwhile, opposition parties have pulled out of the government's Parliamentary Commission for Inquiry into the Causes of Violence against Women, on the grounds that this is simply being used to push through a very repressive agenda and run roughshod over opposition views.

Even with the Convention in place, violence against women and general misogyny was high and increasing, but the announcement of withdrawal, in March, has acted as a legitimisation for a more entrenched misogyny.

President Erdoğan's ethno-religious nationalism has allotted increasing funds and power to the Turkish Religious Authority, Diyanet, which they use to try and engineer social change and promote the conservative family. Women are encouraged to come to Diyanet organisations with their problems, and the emphasis will be on keeping the family together at almost all costs. This includes discouraging women from going to law even if they are experiencing violence.

While conservative structures are boosted, progressive organisations, especially women's organisations, have been shut down, and leading activists have been detained and imprisoned. This is especially the case in the municipalities that were run by the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and that have been taken over by government-appointed trustees, where the organisations that the HDP nurtured have been systematically dismantled. The HDP has provided the strongest voice for women's rights, and the attacks on the HDP aim to see that voice silenced.

Women in Turkey encounter a society where hard-won rights are being reversed and second-class treatment is being normalised. More are facing violence (the pressures of Covid have made this even worse), and, if they look for help, they will find that sympathetic places have been restricted or closed, and they will be encouraged to go to religious organisations that will be more interested in preserving the integrity of the family than in their well-being. In the worst situations, where the police become involved, they can generally

expect a far from sympathetic hearing, and to see any attacker treated with terrifying leniency.

Conservative family values also have no room for same sex relationships or for trans people, as the treatment of the Istanbul Pride march made clear. First it was banned, on grounds of “indivisibility of the state, public morality and COVID-19 measures”, and then, when marchers went ahead anyway, it was brutally attacked. Indeed, the government has claimed that their main objection to the Istanbul Convention was that it “was hijacked by a group of people attempting to normalize homosexuality – which is incompatible with Turkey’s social and family values”. It is the HDP that has given LGBTI+ people a political voice – an HDP MP even wore a rainbow dress to parliament – but the HDP is threatened with closure. If you live in Turkey, you had better not be a woman, not be gay, and – of course – not be Kurdish.

The situation for people in Turkish-occupied Syria (in Afrîn and in the strip of land including Serê Kaniyê and Girê Spî) has been described in a new quarterly report by the Rojava Information Centre. This sets out how these areas have fallen under “a patchwork of scores of warring militias conducting rights violations amounting to war crimes against the civilian population on a daily basis” – militias that are “trained, armed, funded and commanded by the Turkish government.” The report gives statistics for recorded instances of arrests, extortions, thefts and deaths, but it is the accounts from local people that allow a glimpse into this world of horrors. Here is part of a description, relayed by someone who had left Afrîn, from his friends and family who remained: “Two months ago, a car was burnt in our village. In the aftermath, Ahrar al-Sham mercenaries arrested 17 people and surrounded the village for four days. Nobody could leave or enter the village. Of the ones that were arrested, some had their hands broken, some their ribs, some their legs broken and some their teeth. They employed every method of torture. They beat them with sticks and cables. There was one who had all of his nails ripped out. Most of them were released on paying 1000 USD or 1000 TL, as much as they could get together, and after all of this, they told them, ‘it was not your fault [ie. the arson attack].’ At the end it was made clear that it had been they [the mercenaries] who burned it.”

Life is also far from easy for those who escaped Afrîn to take refuge in the neighbouring region of Shahba. Although this is under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, it is cut off from the rest of the autonomous area by land controlled by the Syrian government, which gives Bashar al-Assad power over what and who goes in and out. He has used that power to put the residents under siege. A recent report by Hawar News Agency describes a worsening situation. Almost daily shelling from nearby Turkish forces is combined with shortages of basic necessities. Syria restricts the entry of fuel, medical supplies, agricultural materials, and other goods and charges heavy taxes on what they do allow through. They also prevent people from leaving to seek medical treatment in nearby Aleppo.

As for the main part of North and East Syria under the Autonomous Administration, despite all that has been done to build up a stable system that respects women's rights and ethnic and religious difference and gives people an active role in controlling their own lives, there is no shortage of external forces trying to sow division and make life difficult.

In some places this takes the form of outright military attack. Turkey and their proxy militias have never stopped trying to take control of more land, especially round strategically-placed Ayn Issa. For local people, this means living in constant fear, or leaving their homes to take refuge in ill-equipped camps.

Beyond these targeted attacks, Turkey aims to destabilise the whole region through severely reducing the water flowing down the Euphrates. Hundreds and thousands of people are directly affected through difficulties accessing basic clean drinking water, and through severely rationed electricity supplies. (Most of the region's power is generated by hydro-electric turbines.) Both agriculture and industry are badly hit, which translates as a daily struggle for a large part of the population. Villagers also have to keep constant watch for members of the invading forces deliberately setting fire to their crops.

The Syrian regime and their Russian backers are keen to ferment instability too, in order to make people in the Arab-majority areas turn against the Autonomous Administration. Aldar Xelil, a leading member of the Democratic

Union Party (PYD), which dominates the Administration, claimed in an interview with Firat News Agency that “Intelligence relations have been established between the Syrian regime and the Turkish state... They want to disturb the psychology of society and diminish their hopes of success. They also want to create conflicting situations between the peoples of the region, especially the Kurdish-Arab people.”

The Rojava Information Centre has just published an 'explainer' examining the recent unrest in Manbij, which describes how genuine concerns can get exploited by external forces in an attempt to encourage distrust and violent protest rather than resolution. They also point out that a major factor hampering more widespread commitment to, and investment in, the Autonomous Administration system is a sense that this is temporary. This is, of course, not helped by lack of international recognition – even (in deference to Turkey) no place in international discussions on Syria's future.

The majority-Arab areas are still struggling to repair extensive war damage and need to be able to focus resources on meeting basic requirements of daily life. Other external factors making life harder for the people in the region are the US Caesar Act, which has devalued the Syrian pound and inflated the price of everything that relies on imports, and the Russian veto on reopening a border crossing for international aid. Since January 2020, all aid has had to come via Damascus, and only a trickle reaches North and East Syria.

A major source of concern for the region – which should be a source of concern for the whole world – is the ticking time bomb of al-Hol camp, which houses some 60,000 people, mainly ISIS families and associates. Monday's Ministerial Meeting of the International Coalition prompted a call from US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, for foreign governments to repatriate their citizens 'for both rehabilitation and prosecution'; and, yesterday, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner submitted her opinion, in response to an ongoing case against the French government, that the European Convention on Human Rights requires European states to repatriate their nationals from the camps. International citizens only make up about a fifth of

the camp's residents. Around half are from Iraq – which has just begun to repatriate the first few hundred of its citizens – and the rest are from Syria.

The situation in the camp is not fully under control. There have been several recent murders, and a lot of escapes. A report for the Guardian describes how women in the camp are arranging marriages over the internet to get enough money to be smuggled out. Most go to Idlib, but the Rojava Information Centre report quoted above also talks of ISIS women and children escapees being settled in Serê Kaniyê and marrying militia fighters there; while rifles have gone the other way – from occupied Girê Spî into the camp. All of which contributes to regional insecurity and local tensions.

In Iraq, disruptive interventions are not restricted to the border regions. After the Kurdistan Regional Government held an independence referendum in 2017, which Iraq refused to recognise, the Iraqi Government responded to the inclusion of the disputed – and oil-rich – region of Kirkuk by driving out the Kurdish peshmerga who had been there since they had protected the city against ISIS. Since then, Kirkuk has undergone a renewed Arabisation, including the replacement of a large number of Kurdish officials.

While the peshmerga are banned from the city, there has been increasing activity by Turkish backed militias. These are mostly trained in Turkey and linked to the Turkmen Front. They regard Kirkuk and Mosul as rightfully part of Turkey and show the Turkish fascist grey-wolf sign. Not good news for Kurdish residents.

The Washington Kurdish Institute also reports a worrying security situation in Kirkuk more generally, with significant threats from ISIS cells, and they claim that the city “has become the main route for drug trafficking, mainly by Iranian-backed militias”.

Currently, the greatest focus of concern remains the mountainous border regions of South Kurdistan/North Iraq, where, as I have described in recent reviews, the Turkish invasion is very deliberately making life impossible for the villages in the region, and local people are being forced to evacuate their

homes. Mass environmental destruction ensures that it is difficult for them to return, as well as inflicting a psychological wound through the destruction of the Kurdish landscape.

Not that all the Turkish airstrikes are within the border area. They have also hit the refugee camp at Maxmur, which houses refugees from Turkey's war against the Kurds in the 1990s and has been a repeated target of Turkish aggression; and they seem to have put especial pressure on the Yazidis. On Sunday Turkey bombed villages of the largely Yazidi area of Şêxan in the Nineveh plain, and on Wednesday there was a drone attack in the Yazidi area of Şengal. A couple of weeks ago, Yazidis displaced from Şengal by ISIS were forced to abandon their IDP camps to escape Turkish bombardment. The stresses on these communities never end.

Turkey is not, of course, the only state making life difficult for the people of the region. Like Turkey, Iran both interferes in adjacent countries and destroys lives within its own borders. Iranian-backed forces contribute to the instability of both Syria and Iraq, and, despite their rivalry, Iran and Turkey cooperate in attacking Kurdish resistance fighters.

As Iran prepares for life under a new president who has been accused of being part of the "death commission" responsible for the extrajudicial killing of thousands of political prisoners in 1988, Hengaw Association for Human Rights has published a sad reckoning from the last four-year presidential term. <https://hengaw.net/en/news/human-rights-situation-during-hassan-rouhanis-second-four-year-presidential-term-in-iranian-kurdistan> It records that at least 710 Kurdish activists were sentenced to prison and 23 were sentenced to death; others died in prison, and many more were killed by the security forces of this heavily-securitised state. The tally of abuse includes 274 kolbars (mountain porters) killed and 662 injured – mostly shot by the Iranian armed forces. That people continue to work as kolbars in these circumstances demonstrates the extreme pressures they are under.

This is a grim picture, but it underlines the importance of the resistance – whether that consists of marching in defiance of the attacks on women, refusing to be driven out of politics in Turkey, defending Kurdistan against the

second largest army in NATO – or even demonstrating in solidarity on the safe streets of Europe.