

# Warfare and Lawfare in Erdoğan's Turkey – a weekly news review

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**A**n animal that feels threatened can be especially dangerous, and the same is true of an authoritarian leader who fears that his dreams of power may be slipping away. As Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan faces a growing storm of problems that threaten his popular support, he is doing what authoritarian leaders do in such circumstances – using state systems to destroy political opposition within the country, attempting to divert attention from internal problems by uniting the majority of the nation against an

external enemy, and also directing anger towards an internal minority. Last week the Turkish government launched battles on two fronts. The Turkish army began a new attack in its ongoing invasion of the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan; and, in their highly politicised courts, the case opened against 108 members of the third largest party in the Turkish parliament, the pro-Kurdish, leftist, Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Both attacks – through warfare and through lawfare – continue and harden Turkey's century-long oppression of the Kurds.

The week began with a long-overdue piece of good news: Joe Biden's recognition of the Armenian Genocide, on behalf of the United States. But that welcome recognition also provides a dreadful lesson in international politics, as well as in the politics of modern Turkey. That it is only now, on the 106th anniversary of the genocide, that the US government will use that term, demonstrates the lack of importance the self-appointed "defender of the free world" gives to social and ethical values. From the point of view of international power politics, ethics have always come a poor second to not offending Turkey, and Turkey refuses to acknowledge that the genocide happened – that, as shown in overwhelming historical evidence, Armenian deaths were not just a part of the casualties of war, but a co-ordinated, deliberate and massive act "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

The US was far from alone. The long list of states that have not recognised the genocide includes the UK. When the Bundestag passed a non-binding resolution in 2016, Chancellor Merkel did not take part in the vote. And, welcome though the US recognition is, it could be argued that recognising a hundred-year-old genocide is an easier way for the US to say they care about human rights than addressing current Turkish oppression. The recognition has added another source of tension to an already troubled relationship, but Turkey is under a lot of pressure and can ill afford to make more enemies.

Denial of the Armenian Genocide is part of the founding myth of the Turkish Republic and is shared by all the country's major parties other than the HDP. In these parties' responses to Biden's speech, the world was able to witness how deeply ingrained Turkish ethnic nationalism is – though realpolitik has made

responses less virulent than some feared. Recognition of genocide is the first step in preventing its repetition. Most Turkish politicians refuse to take that first step. Meanwhile, Turkey's ethnic minorities and non-Muslims are very much second-class citizens, and, just last year, Turkey played a major role in Azerbaijan's ethnically-charged war in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh, where Turkish mercenaries filmed themselves committing war crimes against captured Armenians.

Kurdish historians and politicians have had to acknowledge the part played by Kurdish tribes in the Genocide. This acknowledgment has allowed today's Kurds to build strong bonds with the Armenians, both within and outside Turkey. Followers of Abdullah Öcalan's philosophy champion freedom for all minority groups, and Turkey's one Armenian MP, Garo Paylan, is from the HDP. This week Paylan called for the parliament to recognise the Armenian Genocide, and he tweeted his criticism that there were still streets and schools named after the main architect of the Genocide, Talat Pasha. An independent MP on the extreme right responded, "When the time comes, you will also have a Talat Pasha experience and you should have it." In a nation where a 14 year old can be detained for a social media post criticising the president, no official action has been taken against this threat and incitement to violence.

The day before Biden's historic use of the term "genocide", he made his first phone call to Erdoğan, when he forewarned the Turkish president of what he was going to say. We have not been told if they also discussed the imminent attacks continuing Turkey's invasion of the Kurdistan mountains, but the US has showed itself to be supportive of Turkey's actions here in the past. Turkey is careful to frame their attacks as part of the "war on terror", which in Turkey's case means the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Political interests have persuaded the US and many European countries to accept Turkey's definition of the PKK as terrorists, although in different political circumstances – if they were fighting against oppression by a state the US regarded as in need of regime change, rather than oppression by a NATO ally – they would be seen as fighters for freedom. The PKK terrorist designation provides the lynch pin of Turkish diplomacy, allowing them to dress-up anti-Kurdish oppression as something palatable.

The mountains where Turkey is attacking have provided bases for the PKK since the early 1980s. When the PKK first came to Iraq they were welcomed by and worked with the two main Kurdish parties that still dominate the region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The KDP and PUK were also armed groups struggling against oppression, but as their oppressor was Saddam Hussein and they didn't want to disrupt the capitalist order, they benefited from international support. By the 1990s, as the KDP and PUK competed for power in the newly autonomous region, the PKK was no longer welcome, and the KDP joined with Turkey to try to get rid of them, as well as setting up deals with Turkey for selling Kurdistan's oil. There have been more recent examples of KDP and PKK cooperation – such as when they fought together to rid Iraq from ISIS, when KDP leader, Masoud Barzani, personally thanked his PKK “brothers” – but the Turkish link has persisted, endangering not just the PKK, but also Kurdish autonomy, and regional stability. The KDP has facilitated Turkey's increasing presence in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and they have made no comment on the ongoing Turkish invasion.

Turkey's current campaign began on Friday 23 April, the eve of the Armenian Genocide commemorations. It is part of a series of campaigns that started mid-2019. A map from last July showed 37 Turkish bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, some as far as 40km (25 miles) from the Turkish border. To attack the Kurdish guerrilla forces, the Turkish army is employing fighter jets, helicopters, drones, and artillery, and they are firing gas into the PKK's tunnel systems. Ground forces are being air-dropped into remote locations, as well as attacking by land. Fehim Tastekin, writing in *al Monitor*, argues that the Turkish plan is to disrupt links between PKK bases and so prevent the guerrillas from moving around and carrying out effective actions, as well as preventing them from crossing into Turkey.

Arzu Yilmaz, in an *al Monitor* podcast, stresses that these attacks are about more than the PKK, though the PKK's leading cadres have been subject to targeted assassinations. The fight against the Kurds is also being used to feed Turkish expansionism and Turkish dreams for a leadership role in the Middle East, with control of trade routes and oil pipelines. Yilmaz believes that defeating the PKK would not be easy, however the PKK's ability to function

could be severely restricted, as Tastekin describes. Not that this would be the end of the matter, as the HDP's Hişyar Özsoy points out: "[Turkey] may have dreams of opening corridors by getting support from Washington, agreeing with Hewlêr [Erbil], and including Baghdad, but how will they make peace with 40 million Kurds?"

Turkey has made no secret about wanting to redraw the 1923 boundaries agreed in the Treaty of Lausanne, and to reassert Turkish control over areas such as Mosul, as well as more of Syria. Every piece of land gained in the mountains provides a steppingstone to further attacks and occupations. All the Kurdish areas, and more, are under threat.

And, although the mountains are only sparsely populated, for the villagers who live there life under Turkish attack is difficult and dangerous.

Leading Kurds from all areas have tried to draw attention to what is happening in the mountains, but it is hard to know the extent of public understanding and engagement. English language reports on the main (KDP supporting) news sites are brief and detached, as though they were describing another distant country, rather than a foreign army taking over increasing areas of Kurdistan. At the same time, freedom to protest is increasingly restricted, as we saw with the fatal attacks on anti-government protests at the end of last year, and again this week, when Tevgara Azadi tried to organise a protest in Slemani. Over fifty people, including uninvolved bystanders, were rounded up at gunpoint and detained for three days.

In Turkey itself, Erdoğan doesn't have to rely on the army to attack his enemies – though he uses that too. Lawfare is much cleaner. New presidential powers have almost totally eroded the separation between the executive and the judiciary, and wholesale purges of judges have ensured that the courts are ready to do his bidding. On Monday, a (disappointingly small) group of international observers witnessed the black farce that passed for Turkish justice in the opening day of the Kobane Case, where 108 leading members of the HDP, including the party's former co-chairs and former MPs, face the prospect of life imprisonment. The nub of the indictment – which runs to 3,530 pages – is a tweet sent by the HDP's Central Executive Board in

October 2014 calling on people to protest in support of Kobane, then under siege from ISIS. The protests were attacked by security forces and counter protestors, resulting in tens of deaths – predominantly of HDP supporters. The HDP has made many requests for an official investigation into what happened, but, instead, the HDP Board members are being accused of the homicide of those who died, and also – as always – of disrupting the unity and integrity of the state.

If this trial was meant to demonstrate that all was being done according to due process, it could hardly have got off to a less auspicious start. After the HDP's pretrial press statement was disrupted by the police, the defence lawyers entered the court to find it full of riot police who were occupying their seats. Those for whom there was not space were expected to stay outside the courtroom. Deprived of their full complement of lawyers, the defendants refused to respond to identity checks unless and until their lawyers were admitted. When the presiding judge still refused to admit them, the lawyers who had got in walked out again in protest. After the lunch recess, space was somehow found for all the lawyers, however, various other requests from the defence team were turned down. The case was due to restart on Monday, but has now been postponed until 18 May, after Turkey's seventeen-day "lockdown" – though this isn't being allowed to affect more important things, such as tourist facilities.

In Syria, as well as carrying out continuous low level military attacks via mercenary militias, Turkey is waging a water war. They continue to hold back water from the Euphrates in defiance of their 1987 agreement with Syria. After three months there are growing, and potentially severe, threats of shortages of drinking water and water for agriculture, of pollution, and of damaged fish stocks, and, within days, the hydroelectric dams will only be able to operate at a fraction of their normal level. Water supplies also continue to be a problem for Heseke, where the pumping station is on Turkish-occupied land. Now Turkey's mercenaries are diverting the power supply needed to run the pumping station.

As I find myself writing every week, the lack of international response to all this is devastating. Maybe in another 106 years a US president will recognise

Turkey's genocidal attacks on the Kurds, but what is needed is action now. Many people outside the affected groups don't even know what is happening – especially in the Kurdistan mountains. If you do nothing else, please spread the word.