

Imperial legacies – a weekly news review

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For a large part of British media, Shamima Begum is the poster girl of evil: a woman who praised and colluded in unspeakable atrocities carried out by the Islamic State (ISIS). One of three London schoolgirls who ran away to Syria to become ISIS brides – and the only one of the three known to have survived – Begum has been in the news again this week following the publication of a new book. This details how the man who helped them, and many others, cross from Turkey into Syria, while British police were conducting a widespread search for the missing girls, was actually a Canadian secret agent working for ISIS under cover. This is not a new revelation. The man's secret service links were exposed when he was captured in Turkey in 2015 but this detailed and high-profile exposition has reopened debates on what should

happen to Begum, who is stuck in a camp in Syria and is appealing the cancellation, in 2019, of her British citizenship.



Shamima Begum, one of three London schoolgirls who ran away to Syria to become ISIS brides

As Begum was only fifteen when she left the UK, it is argued that her recruitment to ISIS should be considered as child grooming and trafficking – trafficking that we now know was facilitated by a western spy. This argument gets shouted down by the lock-her-up-and-throw-away-the-key brigade, who claim that her actions put her beyond the pale. But in all the copious media coverage, neither those concerned about Begum's individual rights as a minor, nor those overcome by indignation at ISIS atrocities, seem to find much time for concern for the communities that ISIS destroyed and that are still struggling to recover. We see little mention of the current situation of the Yazidis, for example, and little consideration of what refusal by Western countries to take responsibility for their nationals who joined ISIS means for the people in North and East Syria, who have been left guarding them.

This lack of thought for other peoples is symptomatic of the attitudes and prejudices that have helped ISIS to recruit among the west's ethnic minority populations: attitudes and prejudices fostered by imperialist divide and rule. The racism that underpinned the British Empire didn't stop when the empire's former subjects, such as Begum's family, immigrated to Britain. Under the pressures of late capitalism, and with the left in disarray, violent Islamist

movements have been able to offer a mirage of a more meaningful future at the same time as far right groups have exploited the frustrations of some of the immigrants' neighbours.

Al-Hol

Shamima Begum was held in the vast and dangerous al-Hol camp, which accommodates captured ISIS families. Although many countries expressed relief when the last piece of ISIS-controlled territory was retaken, they have all washed their hands of the problem of what to do with the prisoners and their families. The US-led coalition has allowed most of the burden of securing the camp to fall on the hugely overstretched Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Abdication of responsibility is yet another way that imperial nations have exploited the resources of poorer and less powerful parts of the world. The Autonomous Administration has called for internationally run trials, for the repatriation of foreign fighters and families, and for help running the detention camps and prisons. Instead, they have been given much less than the minimum help needed for basic security, and a trickle of women and children have been taken back to their countries of origin.

Al-Hol has long been recognised as a very dangerous place where camp residents have attempted to establish their own ISIS regime. Those who resist can be punished with death, and another generation of children is being reared according to their brutal beliefs. Begum actually had to be moved to Roj camp for her own safety after she had spoken with a British journalist in 2019.

The Autonomous Administration does not have the resources to keep control of al-Hol, but last week their internal security forces (Asayish) carried out the first part of an intensive and systematic search through the different sections to attempt to root out the most troublesome elements and nip disruptive plans in the bud. Two thousand Asayish have been taking part in the combing operation. So far, they have arrested 121 people who were actively working with ISIS, including 15 women; uncovered tunnels and trenches and places used for training and punishment; and removed mobile phones, weapons, Turkish military uniforms, and a large amount of equipment used for murder and torture. Delegations from the US-led coalition and from the US State

Department have visited to be briefed on what has been happening. The Rojava Information Centre reports that a representative from the Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) "reviewed the ongoing operations with them, assessing the critical status of the camp as the result of international inaction to longstanding concerns."



Al Hol camp in northeast Syria, which hosts internally displaced people and families of ISIS members.

Iraq

ISIS emerged out of the chaos following America's devastating imperial intervention in Iraq. Although the 2003 Iraq War, which ended Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship, was nominally a war for democracy, it left a legacy of competing groups that care little for any sort of democratic norms. The insurgency against the US-led occupation saw the emergence of warring parties based around hardening divisions between Sunni and Shia, with the former including the violent jihadists who formed ISIS, and the latter often heavily controlled from Tehran. And there are major divisions within these groups, too. Although elections have been held, governments have been the product of deals between powerful groups, and competing political forces maintain their own militias. Even after the territorial defeat of ISIS, functioning and effective governance has proved elusive. In 2019, mass protests against

corruption and sectarian self-interest, and against government failure to address basic needs, were met with lethal violence.

This week, there were fears that simmering tensions could erupt into full-scale civil war between two powerful Shia groups – the followers of Muqtada al-Sadr, and a coalition of parties with ties to Iran. Al-Sadr, who comes from a powerful dynasty of clerical leaders and rose to prominence in the fight against US occupation, has broad grassroots support among poor Shia communities, and presents himself as the authentic Iraqi Shia voice. The power struggle between the two groups has involved political brinkmanship alongside, sometimes violent, protest.

After the October 2021 election, which had been brought forward in response to the 2019 protests, al-Sadr's party was the biggest group in parliament, and aimed to form a government together with Sunni parties and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). They were blocked by the Iran-backed parties (supported by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)) exploiting a rule that 2/3 of MPs needed to be present in order to elect a president. In June, al-Sadr tried to end the stalemate by calling on his MPs to resign from parliament, but when, in July, the Iranian-backed groups attempted to elect their choice of president, al-Sadr cut across their plans by calling on his supporters to invade Baghdad's Green Zone and occupy the parliament.

This week's actions were triggered by a statement on Monday, from the man who al-Sadr had looked up to as his spiritual leader. Ayatollah Kadhim al-Hairi announced his own retirement and called on his followers to look to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, while also belittling al-Sadr's religious competence. Al-Sadr responded with a show of strength. He announced, not for the first time, that he was leaving politics. Meanwhile his supporters, who were already occupying the parliament building, took over the presidential palace and the council of ministers building, and clashes erupted between them and the more hard-line pro-Iran militias. These grew increasingly violent and sparked similar clashes in other Shia cities, leaving – in some estimates – 30 people dead, though restraint by other militias and by government forces prevented the death toll from being much higher. And then, with a firm speech from al-Sadr, in which he even claimed that all those involved “the

killer and the person killed” were both in hell, the protests stopped as quickly as they had begun and the Sadrists withdrew from the Green Zone completely. However, al-Sadr has demonstrated both his strength and his control, and, with no clear prospect for a resolution of underlying tensions, there are fears of future violence. Meanwhile the weakness of the Iraqi government leaves the country exposed to further exploitation by other powers.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq achieved autonomy during America’s 1991 Iraq war, when the Kurdish provinces rose up in rebellion against Saddam Hussein. Its survival was made possible through a no-fly zone created by the US, the UK and France. Sponsorship by the US and its allies has also, effectively, supported the region’s endemic corruption and feudal clan politics.

This week, people remembered how the Kurdistan Regional Government came to be dominated by the Barzani family’s KDP. They marked the anniversary of Masud Barzani’s 1996 invitation to Saddam Hussein, less than a decade after Saddam had carried out the genocide of up to 180,000 Kurds, to bring the Iraqi army to Hewlêr and support the KDP in their fight against the rival PUK. The same ruthless self-interest is demonstrated in the KDP’s close ties with Turkey and their cavalier attitude towards human rights.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) issued a statement last Sunday on the arrests, earlier in the month, of politicians, activists, and journalists when the regional authorities tried to prevent anti-government protests called by the New Generation Movement. These arrests took place in both KDP-run Hewlêr and Duhok and in PUK-run Slemani. HRW’s Deputy Middle East Director commented, “Kurdish authorities often tout the region’s prosperity and stability relative to other parts of Iraq, but the pre-emptive arrest of activists, opposition politicians, and journalists merely for organizing, attending, and covering peaceful political protests is nothing to be proud of.” On Tuesday, Firat News Agency reported that a man detained in July for protesting against a Turkish drone attack in which nine civilians were killed was still being held in custody 40 days later. Meanwhile, concerns are increasing for the Badinan prisoners, who are on hunger strike in Hewlêr to demand recognition of basic

rights. Lawyers have been refused permission to see them and they have been denied the conditional release they should be entitled to. Twenty-two members of the Kurdistan regional parliament have called for a meeting with government ministers to discuss the prisoners' situation. A musician who composed a song in their support has been arrested.

KDP elites have gained huge personal wealth through lucrative oil deals with Turkey. They are also assisting Turkey's fight against their PKK rivals in the mountains, even though this is effectively colluding in the invasion of their own country and the elimination of their hard-won autonomy. This week saw another report about the KDP building a road to facilitate the Turkish army's control over the Iraqi mountains.

Iraqi government weakness and KDP complicity allows Turkey to carry out drone attacks in Iraq with impunity. This week they fatally wounded Abu Zêyd Ebdullah Ubêyd, a father of six, in Maxmur refugee camp, and injured two fighters from the autonomous Yazidi forces in Şengal. Both attacks happened in places where local people have organised their community according to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. The Turkish government is determined to make these people's lives as difficult as possible. The community in Maxmur originally came from North Kurdistan/southeast Turkey, escaping the deliberate destruction of their villages by the Turkish state in the 1990s. Their determination has been tested over decades. The Yazidis discovered Öcalan's ideas in 2014, when the KDP and the Iraqi state had abandoned them to ISIS, and the Kurdish PKK and YPG brought thousands of them to safety and helped them establish their own self defence. The Yazidis are determined not to give up their autonomy and their ability to defend themselves, however Turkey's attacks prevent more Yazidis from leaving the IDP camps and returning to their homeland. After the attack, angry Yazidi youth set fire to a shelter where KDP forces were based, and the KDP shot at them.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has also seen targeted assassinations of leading figures associated with the Kurdish freedom movement, with no one held to account. Last Saturday, family and friends marked 100 days since the assassination of Mehmet Zeki Çelebi outside his Slemani restaurant. The

next day, Suheyl Xurşîd Ezîz – author, historian and member of the general assembly of the Movement for a Free Society in Kurdistan (Tevgera Azadiya Civaka Kurdistanê) – was shot dead outside his house in Kifrî. In both cases, fingers have been pointed at the Turkish state.

Chaos within Iraq has led to fears that Turkey will exploit the situation to increase its power and presence and those of its proxies. Last week, the Turkish-trained and armed Turkman Front was observed threatening to take control of Kirkuk.

Syria

In Syria, interference by global imperial powers – the US and Russia – has opened up space for involvement of local powers – Turkey and Iran. Talks on Russian-sponsored détente between Syria and Turkey will, no doubt, continue, and their meeting point would be joint opposition to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Most possible outcomes are pretty bleak, however the reasons for the different parties' opposition to the Autonomous Administration are very different. Syria's President Assad still hopes to return to the centralised power that he wielded before 2011. Turkey wants to crush any autonomy involving Kurds, and to eliminate the possibility of such autonomy developing in the future by driving Kurds out of the region. And they also want to regain some of the control lost with the Ottoman empire. Russia wants to keep both Damascus and Ankara on side, but their own problem with the Autonomous Administration concerns the presence of US forces working with the SDF in the fight against ISIS. Views on how this situation could unfold depend on who you ask.

Turkey

Within Turkey, imperial attitudes inform a colonialist approach towards the rights of Kurdish people, and an exploitive greed that readily merges into corruption.

Another batch of revelations by Sedat Peker – exiled gangster and former friend of Turkey's ruling élites – has exposed new examples of the overlap

between government figures and organised crime. In a series of tweets released last weekend, Peker claimed that presidential advisors were involved in a scam that extorted bribes from businesspeople. President Erdoğan's son in law's brother was named as coordinator. None of Peker's many explosive claims has been followed up by a formal investigation. More revelations are promised for the lead-up to the elections, due next June.

When it comes to Turkey's human rights abuses, there are always too many to write about, but this week's news has been dominated by the stark image of Ali Rıza Arslan, who went to Diyarbakır Courthouse to collect the remains of his son, Hakan, and was simply handed his son's bones in a box from the storeroom. Hakan Arslan was killed in January 2016 in the conflict between Kurds and government forces that devastated whole areas of southeast Turkey. Finding the body and getting it identified had been a long struggle in itself, but when his father went to the courthouse, he had expected to be given a coffin and for his son's remains to be treated with the dignity demanded by human rights legislation. He told BBC Turkish, "They took the box of my 28-year-old son's bones out of the closet and handed them to me. I did not expect this at all, my eyes darkened, I gasped, it was as if the whole of Diyarbakır fell on my head at that moment." What makes this incident so shocking is that it is far from isolated. Disrespect for the dead is yet another way that the Turkish authorities oppress Kurdish families.

As I was finishing this article news came out of the arrest of Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Deputy, Semra Güzel, whose parliamentary immunity was lifted in March. She will join a long list of democratically elected Kurdish politicians behind bars. The gloating tweet posted by Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, the man who is meant to protect Turkey from criminality, illuminates the poisonous corruption of Turkish politics. He refers to the party as the HDPKK to imply that the HDP and PKK are one and the same, and he addresses his tweet to the main opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as though Güzel and Kılıçdaroğlu were friends. Sadly, Kılıçdaroğlu's party also supported the removal of Güzel's immunity.

Orientalist attitudes

For the old European imperial powers, whose imperial legacy includes the division of Kurdistan, approaches to the Middle East combine self-interest and Orientalism. In their dealings with Turkey, they are guided by their own strategic and economic interests – or at least those of their ruling class. Meanwhile they can pretend that Turkey's human rights abuses and corruption can be explained away as oriental inevitabilities, and be reassured that, anyway, they do not affect fellow Europeans.

European countries continue to make deals with Turkey. A question to the German Federal Government from Die Linke MP, Gökay Akbulut, has revealed that Germany routinely forwards all convictions of Turkish citizens living in Germany to the Turkish Ministry of Justice, including the many convictions resulting from the broad ban on "PKK" linked associations. That Turkish citizens from Germany are often arrested when they visit Turkey may not be entirely coincidental.

What ordinary people have to do

It is always a source of inspiration and wonder that, despite so much stacked against them, the Kurds continue to resist. The importance of resistance was beautifully described this week, not by a Kurd but by the Californian Marxist writer and activist, Mike Davis, who is on palliative care for terminal cancer: "I've seen miracles happen. I've seen ordinary people do the most heroic things. When you've had the privilege of knowing so many great fighters and resisters, you can't lay down the sword, even if things seem objectively hopeless... What keeps us going, ultimately, is our love for each other, and our refusal to bow our heads, to accept the verdict, however all-powerful it seems. It's what ordinary people have to do. You have to love each other. You have to defend each other. You have to fight."

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