

# The American elephant in the room – a weekly news review

[11:52 am 30/04/2022](#)



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History will not look kindly on President Biden – assuming that there is anyone left to write it. The United States is not only choosing escalating militarisation over negotiation in Ukraine, but is also enabling a brutal and destabilising war in Kurdistan, a war that holds the potential to impact countries way beyond the immediate region. To be fair, Biden is only following a long-established American tradition of military intervention in what it perceives to be the best interests of US capital. When Biden was elected following the erratic leadership of President Trump, American politicians proudly announced that America was back. At that time, I looked at America's historical impact on the

Kurdish region. This week, I want to focus on their impact on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, an impact that goes beyond even the violent instability that was unleashed and fed by the shock and awe and wholesale destruction of the 2003 Iraq War.

### **The United States versus the PKK**

Iraq provides a brutal example of America's ability to win the war and lose the peace. After the country was torn apart in the US-led invasion, Iraq suffered years of civil war between rival militias, and the growth of ISIS, which took control of large areas. There is still fierce competition between different groups, separated by different forms of religion and by different allegiances to the neighbouring powers of Iran and Turkey. Problems are compounded by deep corruption, which – along with difficult material conditions – prompted mass protests in 2019 that were violently put down by the government.

In the midst of this chaos, America and their western allies have regarded the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a source of stability and hope. They have welcomed, and benefited from, its business-friendly government, and looked the other way when the Region's leaders have used their powers to benefit themselves, and have cracked down on dissent.

The PKK's guerrillas have also been in the region since the 1980s, and especially since 1998, when they were thrown out of Syria. As I discussed last week, Turkey's attacks on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq can only be understood as an invasion and occupation, but in announcing its attacks to the world, Turkey references the right of self-defence, as stated in article 51 of the UN Charter; in this case, defence against the PKK. The PKK has long been demanding peace negotiations, and the idea that they provided an imminent threat that could justify the invasion of a sovereign state, never mind an attack of this size, is without evidential support. However, it is a fiction that has readily been accepted by the US and its friends.

This is not just reluctance to criticise a NATO ally – though it is that too. The US considers the PKK an enemy and is fully supportive of Turkey's attacks. It was the CIA that orchestrated the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1999, and in

2018, under Trump, the US announced bounties worth millions of dollars for information leading to the identification or location of senior PKK members, Murat Karayilan, Cemil Bayik, and Duran Kalkan. This offer was repeated by Biden's government a year ago. American rhetoric is all for freedom and democracy, but when people attempt to free themselves from the shackles of capitalism and challenge the superiority of liberal democracy with ideas of grassroots democracy, that is a different matter.

When those same people attempt their own self-defence against state oppression, and challenge existing state structures, that is regarded as unacceptable. No matter that they sign up to the Geneva Convention, as the PKK has done since 1995; that they renounce ambitions for independence, and instead pursue a drive for local autonomy that would not directly challenge existing borders, as the PKK has done since 2005; that they repeatedly call for ceasefires and peace negotiations in order to achieve a political settlement that recognises basic human rights; nor that they have provided vital resistance to the expansion of ISIS.

This antagonism is not a principled position against all changes to state structures, or even state boundaries. It is driven by political ideology. The US and other Western nations welcomed the break-up of Yugoslavia, and facilitated the establishment of autonomy for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. These were perceived to be favourable to their own interests, and they did not threaten what Öcalan has called Capitalist Modernity.

It is the West's deep intolerance of any challenge to capitalism and to the associated structures of liberal democracy that has made it easy for the US and Europe to accede to Turkey's demands that the PKK be labelled a terrorist organisation. There are also important strategic reasons behind their appeasement of Turkey, but when it comes to the PKK, they are happy to assist Turkey in its attempts to bring about the organisation's extinction. While growing numbers of individuals, including politicians, as well as lawyers, academics, trade unionists, and people from all backgrounds, have called for the removal of the PKK from terrorism lists, this has not been taken up by governments. This week, in Germany, we saw that even the Green Party

Foreign Minister is ready to parrot Turkey's claims of self-defence when challenged about arming Turkey when Turkey is attacking Iraq.

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq itself, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the regional government, has become dependent on Turkey and is unashamed of its role in supporting Turkey's invasion of its own country. The Turkish Daily Sabah claims that the KDP's peshmerga are helping Turkey by blocking off the region, and that the Turkish army intends to penetrate 50-60km into Iraq and will not retreat after this operation. The KDP claim to have intercepted an arms delivery intended for the PKK, which included 12,000 gas masks; but they haven't felt the need to comment on the many accusations that Turkey has been using chemical weapons.

Fehim Tastekin, in Al Monitor, reports on claims of a secret deal with the Iraqi Government that would allow Turkey to take over a 30km strip along the border, as they have been attempting to do in Syria. The existence of an agreement has been publicly denied by the Iraqi Foreign Minister, and greater Turkish control is strongly resisted by pro-Iranian groups, as well as by the other parties in the Kurdistan Region.

### **Over the heads of the Yazidis**

The United States is also believed to have helped facilitate the 2020 agreement that gave shared control of Şengal to the Iraqi Federal Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, without consulting the Yazidi people who live there. The Yazidis had formed their own autonomous structures and have been resisting attempts to have their autonomy taken away. But Yazidi autonomy was achieved with help from the PKK and follows Öcalan's philosophy, which ensures that it gets no sympathy from America. There have been no protests from America or its allies when Turkey has carried out bomb and drone attacks on Şengal, or on the refugee camp in Makhmour – also in Iraq – whose inhabitants run their community according to Öcalan's ideas.

The Iraqi army has been putting increasing pressure on the Yazidis, and the KDP has been pushing Iraq to attack with a large force. They have now brought in armoured vehicles and tanks, and some Yazidi resistance units

have withdrawn to avoid further fighting; however, an attack on a Yazidi Women's Resistance Unit resulted in the death of one of the women fighters. The Iraqi government has also imposed the governor of Nineveh to act as mayor over Şengal.

On 20 April, two foreign journalists, who had been researching and filming the Yazidis, were arrested in Şengal by the Iraqi military. Marlene Förster was only allowed to make contact with the German embassy on Thursday, after going on hunger strike in her solitary cell. There is no news from her Slovenian colleague, Matej Kavčič. Förster has been accused by Iraq of "supporting terrorism".

### **Allies of convenience in Syria**

In Syria, the US has wound up on the same side as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which also follows Öcalan's philosophy. The Americans have done nothing to help their unlikely allies achieve international recognition, and they have tried to dilute their political approach by pushing for power-sharing negotiations with groups that oppose most of what the Administration stands for. While there is, no doubt, real rapport between soldiers on the ground, the contingent nature of US support was again exposed in the official response, last weekend, to unprovoked Turkish attacks on the city of Kobanê that injured two civilians. The US Embassy in Syria tweeted, "We are deeply concerned by reports of shelling on Kobani and deplore any loss of civilian life. The United States calls on all parties to deescalate." Twitter users were quick to point out the cruel absurdity of calling on wounded civilians to "deescalate" and the failure to name Turkey. This was after the SDF leader had pointed out, also on Twitter, that, "Turkey is escalating violations of int'l covenants with guarantor countries against our regions. The targeting of Kobani, shelling of innocent civilians, & killings of administrative figures by drones are provocations that threaten security & peace & hinder anti-ISIS operations." The United States is one of the guarantor countries he refers to; Russia is the other. On Thursday, it was reported that, in the previous ten days, ISIS had been responsible for killing sixteen people in Deir ez-Zor alone, including seven employees of the

Autonomous Administration, who were murdered while they took their Iftar meal.

## **Inside Turkey**

US global dominance ensures the impact of their actions, but this cannot be used to obscure or absolve the deeply rooted problems within Turkey itself and within its government.

These problems were highlighted last week by two issues not directly related to the Kurdish Question. Last Sunday was the 107th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, which Turkey still refuses to recognise. Worse than that, children in Turkey go to schools named after the perpetrators, and, for ultranationalists, this has become a day for taunting Armenian commemorations, and for loud public displays of hate, including on the lawns outside the Turkish Ambassador's residence in Washington.

This public hate is encouraged from above. The Turkish government chose the day before the anniversary for the inauguration of a new embassy in Uruguay by the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu. When Armenian protestors demonstrated outside, a grinning Çavuşoğlu made the sign of the Grey Wolves from the safety of his official car. The Grey Wolves have been described as Turkey's "Brownshirts", and are responsible for beating up and murdering many people from ethnic minorities.

Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) MP, Garo Paylan, who is himself Armenian, submitted a bill to parliament for the recognition of the genocide, as he has done for each of the last seven years. He didn't expect it to be accepted, but he claims that he has never had such a harsh response. He is now threatened with legal action.

Sezgin Tanrikulu, a deputy from the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP), is also under investigation. He has been accused of insulting the Turkish State by putting out a Twitter post that ends "Without confronting this date, which is the milestone of evil, true justice cannot be achieved". Tanrikulu's statement is noteworthy as the CHP as a party are also adamant

genocide deniers, and their leader even upbraided Erdoğan for not protesting strongly enough against Biden's ground-breaking recognition of the genocide last year.

The day after Çavuşoğlu's undiplomatic incident in Uruguay, the world received further confirmation of Turkey's determination to defy international rules and standards, when the businessman/philanthropist, Osman Kavala, was sentenced to life imprisonment without parole for "attempted overthrow" of the government. The defiance here is against the European Court of Human Rights, which had ruled that the charges against Kavala are baseless and that he should be immediately released. The Court also recognises life imprisonment without parole as a breach of human rights in itself, as it denies the basic right of hope. This sentence lays down a challenge to the Council of Europe, which is charged with attempting to force compliance of its court's rulings. The Council has recently taken the unprecedented step of expelling Russia. Such a significant defiance of the court could be used to justify Turkey's expulsion, too, but this would sever all diplomatic engagement, and deny other Turkish cases access to an international hearing, so sanctions on Turkey's role within the Council could be a better option.

In a statement that expresses both deep disappointment and shock, Tiny Kox, president of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, reminds us that "In its decision of 10 December 2019, the European Court of Human Rights found that Osman Kavala's arrest and pre-trial detention took place in the absence of evidence to support a reasonable suspicion he had committed an offence... and also that it pursued an ulterior purpose, namely, to silence him and dissuade other human rights defenders". The Council will have to act firmly if it is to maintain credibility.

For now, Erdoğan is enjoying the bravado of standing up against international opinion, and police have arrested demonstrators protesting Kavala's sentence.

Meanwhile, as always, there has been persecution of Kurds for being Kurds. A teacher has been fined for speaking Kurdish and Arabic to pupils, and

encouraging them to sign up to elective Kurdish classes. A man has been arrested after singing in Kurdish in the street. And the Constitutional Court has ruled that it is not discrimination to prevent a child being given a name that includes a 'w' – a letter that is used in Kurdish but not in Turkish. The police have also detained at least ten members of the Social Freedom Party (TÖP), which is part of the Democracy Alliance with the HDP.

## **Russia in Syria**

I have concentrated on the overwhelming impact of the United States, but Russia also has no wish to see the Kurdish project succeed. They want to force all parts of Syria back under the control of President Assad, for whom they have provided vital military backing. Assad's forces have been putting pressure on the autonomous Aleppo neighbourhoods of Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafiyeh by keeping them under siege. An agreement has now been reached that has allowed some flour through to the bakeries, but reports on what is happening vary.

When it comes to relations between Russia and Turkey, both balance their conflicting interests with their joint desire to be rid of the Autonomous Administration. Turkey has stopped Russia using Turkish airspace to reach Syria, and Russia has said that they will veto the continued opening of the border crossing from Turkey, and so force goods to enter via Damascus; but these moves don't stop discussions, they are part of the ongoing diplomacy.

## **Building solidarity**

For those challenging Turkish aggression, especially in Northern Iraq, the opportunities for high level diplomacy are distinctly limited, but that doesn't mean that they can't get international support, nor that that support doesn't matter – though it will have to grow a lot bigger if it is to have real impact. Politicians who have spoken up against Turkey's ongoing invasion of Iraq include the Foreign Affairs spokesperson for Ireland's Sinn Féin, as well as Jeremy Corbyn MP, former leader of the UK labour Party, and Ögmundur Jónasson, Iceland's former Minister for Justice and Human Rights. And the



Scottish Trade Union Congress has passed an emergency motion. Last week also saw a large number of street protests across Europe and wherever there are Kurdish communities, including outside the UN in Geneva. Kurdish voices will be on the street again for May Day.