

‘Good’ Kurds and ‘Bad’ Kurds – a weekly news review

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Last Monday, the beaming faces of Hilary and Chelsea Clinton announced to the world that their TV company had bought the rights to ‘The Daughters of Kobani’, “an extraordinary account of brave, defiant women fighting for justice and equality”.

On Wednesday and Thursday, the clampdown on women’s rights activists in Turkey continued with the arrest and detention of two members of the Free Women’s Movement (TJA) – spokesperson Ayşe Gökkan (a former mayor of Nusaybin who had already been detained 83 times) and activist Zeynep

Ölbeci. In response to these arrests, the Clintons said nothing. Just as Hilary Clinton made no protest when, under her husband's presidency, the US listed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as a terrorist organisation and played a leading role in the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.

It is Ocalan's ideas that inspire the Kobanê fighters in Syria whose 'inspiring story' Hilary Clinton is so thrilled to bring to viewers around the world. The Turkish media has vented its anger against this 'pro-PKK drama', but no serious commentator believes that Hilary Clinton's views have changed since she reassured the Turkish government, as US Secretary of State in 2015, that the United States stood with Turkey in its fight against the PKK.

The Turkish government believes that the only 'good' Kurd is a dead Kurd, or at least a Kurd that is dead to his/her own culture and is assimilated into 'Turkishness'. Key to its strategy is the designation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation, and it classes every action in support of Kurdish culture and rights as 'linked to the PKK' and prosecutable under 'anti-terrorism' legislation.

The US makes its own distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' Kurds. These are based on the hard politics of US imperial interests, but, generally, that means falling in line with the Turkish position, because Turkey is seen as a vital strategic partner in NATO. The USA has recognised the 'terrorist' listing of the PKK, as have the European Union and the United Kingdom (UK). However, when it had to acknowledge that the Syrian Kurds of the People's Protection Units (YPG)/Women's Protection Units (YPJ) provided the only effective ground force in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State, or Daesh), they couldn't also accept Turkey's insistence that their allies in this battle should be included under the 'terrorism' label. It became important for the US to stress the difference between the 'good' Kurds of the YPG/YPJ and the 'bad' Kurds of the PKK.

To reinforce this distinction, US rhetoric not only plays down the radical politics of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES) but also seeks to divorce political actors in Syria from their ideological inspiration in Abdullah Ocalan. An authorised version of the Kurdish women fighters of the YPJ, filtered through the lens of a Clinton TV company, fits this pattern

perfectly. No matter that the actual Kurdish women's movement defines itself against the liberal feminism espoused by the Clintons and its failure to address hierarchy and to challenge fundamental social structures. Such prominent coverage of the women of Kobanê may help to increase support for the Kurds more generally, and Ilham Ahmed, the formidable president of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council, has given the project a fulsome welcome, but the US rhetoric should not be allowed to extinguish more progressive realities.

And, of course, the US doesn't rely only on rhetoric. Rhetoric is backed by action – and inaction – calculated to reinforce the 'good' Kurd/'bad' Kurd divide. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which supports a neoliberal economic policy and works closely with Turkey, falls comfortably within the US's 'good' Kurds bracket. The US openly encourages the KDP to support Turkey's attacks against the 'bad' Kurds of the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, and to disrupt contacts between the PKK and 'good' Kurdish fighters in Syria.

President Erdoğan's ultimate (and public) goal is control over the area claimed by Turkey in 1920, which extends much further than the borders agreed in the subsequent Treaty of Lausanne. His vision of Turkey incorporates northern Syria and Iraq, including Aleppo, Mosul and Kirkuk. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the Iraqi government appears not to have given Turkey the approval it sought for further military involvement in the region. However, Erdoğan is confident he can continue to rely on his strategic partnership with the US; and when he was asked (on 22 January) about the possibility of direct Turkish involvement in the Yazidi region of Sinjar, which a recent US-brokered agreement has allotted to the Iraqi government and the KDP, he threatened 'one night, we can suddenly come'.

To please Turkey, the US also puts the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK) in the 'bad' Kurds bracket and includes the party on the 'terrorism' list, even though PJAK's target is the Iranian regime that the US regards as its arch enemy. PJAK is the organisation of Iranian Kurds who follow Ocalan's philosophy. They operate from outside Iran because the situation inside the

country is so oppressive – both against any political opposition and against the Kurdish minority.

Over the last three weeks, the Iranian authorities have rounded up at least eighty Kurdish citizens of Iran in a cruel sweep of detentions and the Hengaw Organization for Human Rights observes that: “In recent detentions, the minimum domestic law of the Islamic Republic of the right of access to a lawyer, immediate notification of the charge, the detention facility, and the location of detention have not been observed”.

In the fraught powerplay between the US (and its allies) and Iran, these Kurds are not so much ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but inconvenient and ignored.

An even more resounding silence has greeted Turkey’s continued attacks on AANES – including on those ‘brave defiant women’ championed by the Clintons – and Turkey’s continued clampdown on leftist and Kurdish politicians and activists within their own borders. These inconvenient truths are not allowed to disturb geopolitical relations.

Two more Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) members were detained in Amed (Diyarbakir) on Tuesday, besides the detentions of women activists mentioned above. On Friday, police used water cannon and tear gas to attempt to break up a demonstration in Batman that had been called to promote Kurdish unity, and detained 23 protestors. The endless arrests and detentions, the blanket labelling of all political opponents as ‘terrorists’ and as ‘threats to the state’, and the blatant suppression of every dissident voice, should be the subject of international debate among all those nations who regard themselves as part of the ‘free world’. This isn’t happening.

It is true that the European Court of Human Rights judgements against Turkey in the cases of Selahattin Demirtaş and Osman Kavala received support in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe this week – and many of the speakers were no doubt sincere in their expressed desire for meaningful action. However, German Foreign Minister, Heiko Maas, who chairs the Committee of Ministers, has made it clear that his approach to errant member

states is not to 'burn bridges', so threats of possible expulsion can sound hollow.

Germany has been a good friend to Turkey – or more accurately to Turkish and German trade – and particularly supportive of the European Union's payments to Turkey to keep refugees out of the rest of Europe. Another good – self-interested – friend has been the UK; even more so since Brexit has forced the UK government to look for new trading partners, and freed it from EU constraints.

International meetings are about more than what happens in the debating chamber and the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) delegates from Turkey who have come to Strasbourg for the Parliamentary Assembly have been busy with private meetings with key figures. Their discussions covered the continued prison isolation of Abdullah Ocalan and the mass prison hunger strike that is calling for the isolation to end. The hunger strike is now on day 65, and may move on to an even more critical stage if the Turkish authorities continue to defy international human rights law and prevent visits from Ocalan's lawyers and family.

A delegation from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) has just returned from a visit to Turkey, and many people have expressed disappointment that it didn't take the opportunity to be the first visitors in one and a half years to go to Ocalan's prison island of Imrali. However, the situation in Imrali did form part of the CPT delegation's discussions.

HDP Foreign Affairs Spokesperson, Hişyar Özsoy, stressed to the European politicians that Ocalan's isolation is more than a human rights issue. The isolation of the widely recognised Kurdish leader is preventing a negotiated solution to the Kurds' situation in Turkey, and is poisoning the whole of Turkish politics.

All this activity can make it that bit harder for Turkey to act with impunity, but international organisations rarely rise above the interests of their member states. It is clear that the failure of Western nations to respond to Turkey's

authoritarianism and aggression is not due to any lack of material on the nature of Turkish politics. This month, a memorandum from the US Treasury Department stated that ISIS often relies upon moving money on operational hubs in Turkey, and that they “often gathered and sent funds to intermediaries in Turkey who smuggle the cash into Syria or send the funds to hawalas [traditional financial agents] operating in the [IDP and prison] camp”.

This is just the latest document to demonstrate Turkish tolerance of – and, in many instances, active support for – ISIS. On Thursday, the US condemned the murder by ISIS of two Syrian Arab women targeted for their work with the Autonomous Administration (AANES), but none of this has been allowed to affect US relations with the Turkish government.

This week has seen the publication of a particularly chilling account of the evolution of the Turkish deep state, compiled by the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security. While this is a source with its own clear political agenda, it makes a compelling argument. The authors claim that, through groups such as the Grey Wolves at home, and through the systematic use of foreign mercenaries abroad, “Erdoğan now has a private military and paramilitary system at his disposal”. And they outline how “tools forged to serve the deep state’s Kemalist, anti-Islamist (and anti-Kurdish) purposes now serve an Islamist, neo-Ottoman (and, once again, anti-Kurdish) agenda”.

Recent evidence of the deep state in action – with worrying echoes of the disappearances of the 1990s – is provided by the abduction of Socialist Party of the Oppressed activist, Gökhan Güneş, who was kidnapped in Istanbul as he got off the bus to go to work on 20 January. That Güneş’s disappearance did not result in the endless nightmare faced by so many activists and their families is due to the wave of solidarity manifested in Turkey and abroad. The call went out: ‘you took him alive, we want him back!’, and nearly six days later he was released, blindfolded and hooded. Güneş has described how his captors, who called themselves ‘the invisible’, tortured him, threatened him with rape, and tried to force him to spy for them. And he has stated, clearly, that we know who ‘the invisible’ are, and they will never silence oppressed people.

The release of Gökhan Güneş demonstrates the power of grassroots solidarity action but we will need much more solidarity action if we are to force world leaders to take a different path. A vital focus of such action is the call to rid the PKK and Ocalan of the 'terrorism' designation, which has been increasingly recognised as unjustified both morally and legally.

This 'bad Kurds' label has been used to delegitimise a vital struggle for human rights and for a peaceful multicultural coexistence.