

Legacy of Lausanne – a weekly news review

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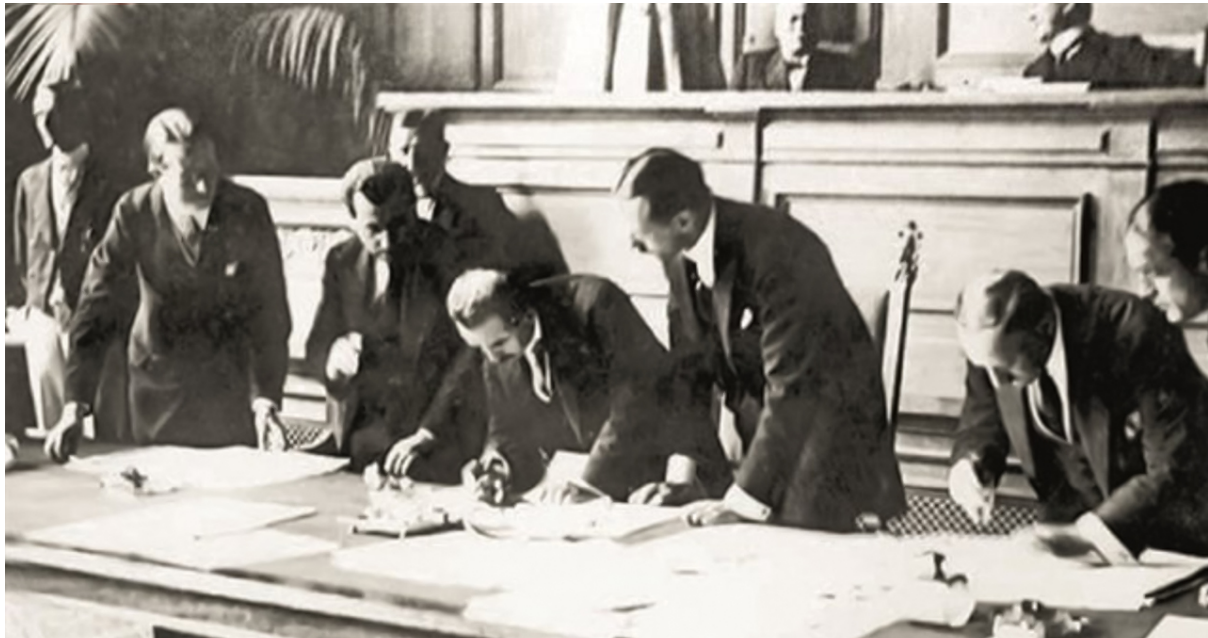
“The Treaty of Lausanne is the basis for the recognition of Turkish sovereignty, but that doesn’t mean that the Turkish government regards it without criticism. President Erdoğan has celebrated its confirmation of Turkish independence – and uses it to criticise Greece - but he has also said that Turkey should not be ‘imprisoned’ by the conditions they faced in 1923, and that the treaty ‘needs revision’.”

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Ninety-nine years ago, the Palais de Rumine, in the Swiss city of Lausanne, witnessed the signing of a peace treaty between the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and the Allied victors of the First World War. This was the treaty that brought into being the new Turkish Republic, and that killed off hopes of an independent Kurdistan. The Kurdish region, already divided between the Ottoman Empire and Iran, was now split between Iran, Turkey, Iraq, and Syria – with the Kurds divided into four persecuted minorities. The Treaty of Lausanne

also granted immunity for crimes “connected to political events” committed between 1914 and 1922 – a period marked by ethnic genocides, including the Armenian Genocide. And, in its exchange of Turkish and Greek populations, it set a precedent for the forced transfer of ethnic populations.



The signature ceremony of the Treaty of Lausanne, 24 July 1923.

To mark the anniversary last Sunday, Kurds from all four parts of Kurdistan held a conference in the same richly decorated room in which the treaty was signed. As Nilüfer Koç of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) tweeted, “On July 24, 2022 the Kurds that they thought were annihilated said in the Rumine Palace: ‘we are united and we are here’”.

The Kurdish struggle seeks to bring an end to the divisions and oppressions resulting from the treaty. The Kurdish Freedom Movement that has been built on the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan no longer looks towards a Kurdish state, which would be faced with its own minorities. Rather, it seeks to transcend the dominance of nation states altogether, and to promote bottom-up autonomous organisation, and cross border links.

The treaty is the basis for the recognition of Turkish sovereignty, but that doesn’t mean that the Turkish government regards it without criticism. President Erdoğan has celebrated the treaty as giving international confirmation of Turkish independence – and is ready to use it to criticise

Greece – but he has also said that Turkey should not be “imprisoned” by the conditions they faced in 1923, and that the treaty “needs revision”. In negotiating Lausanne, Mustafa Kemal – later known as Atatürk – was not able to secure for Turkey all the territory that they claimed in their 1920 National Pact. Erdoğan, and a growing number of other Turkish nationalists, have been questioning the historic treaty agreement and reviving the National Pact claim. The impending centenary of the treaty gives an added drive to their ambitions; and it is no accident that Turkey’s military incursions into Syria and Iraq have brought them closer to realising those National Pact boundaries.

Erdoğan’s demands for control over a 30km strip across northern Syria, which he even presented as a map to the United Nations in 2019, are demands for a large part of the area covered by the National Pact. And, as the Financial Times pointed out last week, “Today, Ankara has varying degrees of responsibility for more than 9mn Syrians, including the refugees inside Turkey, just under half the Arab state’s prewar population.” This estimate is made up of around two million people in the areas under full Turkish control, around four million in Idlib – which is essentially under Turkish protection – and 3.7 million Syrian refugees in Turkey itself. The Turkish-occupied areas are being Turkified, with Turkish institutions overseen by the governors of adjacent Turkish provinces. The Financial Times article quoted a Turkish official who estimated that every day 300 Turkish workers and 200 Turkish trucks were going in and out of occupied Syria through one of the border crossings, and there are seven other crossings, too. They also quoted estimates that there are 4-5,000 Turkish troops in the occupied areas and 8,000 around Idlib, plus over 50,000 Turkish-paid mercenaries. (Not that they used those terms, as the article is disturbingly uncritical of Turkey’s rule.)

When it comes to Iraq, the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi Armed Forces has admitted, following the massacre of Iraqi holidaymakers a week ago, that “Turkish forces are increasingly intervening deep into Iraqi territory, establishing more than 100 outposts”, and that Turkey has five main military bases in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, with more than 4,000 Turkish soldiers.

This last week, Turkish aggression has brought growing threats to both Syria and Iraq, but high-level political interest in the plight of the Kurdish population is little greater than it was in 1923. Today, international leaders do not want to risk making an enemy of Turkey, with its strategic geography and the second largest army in NATO.

In northern Syria

Thanks to Turkey, the people of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria go to bed each night with the fear that the next day will bring Erdoğan's promised invasion. The skies over northern Syria are controlled by Russia and the United States, and both powers have military bases on the ground. This time, neither has agreed to leave the way clear for a Turkish attack, however, Erdoğan has threatened to attack anyway. On Wednesday, this threat was reinforced by Erdoğan's spokesperson, Ibrahim Kalin, who was quoted on Television as saying that Turkey "does not ask permission from anyone to launch a military operation in Syria's north, as Turkey may implement this operation at any time."

Anything approaching normal life is not possible in the shadow of such a threat, but even without a full invasion, Turkey has been testing the limits of international tolerance, with relentless and increasing small-scale attacks; and, so far, they have met little significant resistance. On Thursday, as Rojava Information Centre reported the targeted assassination of four members of the local security forces, the Asayiş, who had been driving to Tal Abyad IDP Camp, they observed that, in 2022, 26 people have been killed by Turkish drones, 12 of them this month, and that a further 65 have been injured.

After Turkey's assassination, a week ago, of two commanders and a young soldier from the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), United States Central Command sent condolences – but without naming Turkey as the perpetrator. Nor did they mention that, in order to carry out this attack on America's allies in the fight against ISIS, Turkey's drone flew through US-controlled airspace. Jiyan Tolhildan, the most senior of the three murdered women, led the counter-terrorism units. She played a prominent part in establishing the YPJ and in the crucial defence of Kobanê, and, as she explained in a film made

about her life some years ago, she was driven by a passion to end the oppression of women that was at least as strong as her desire to fight for Kurdish freedom.



Three killed women by Turkish drone attack on 22 July.

The women were returning from a forum where they had commemorated the tenth anniversary of autonomous control in northern Syria and had discussed the achievements of ten years of women's revolution.

Alongside these drone attacks, Turkey and its mercenaries have kept up daily bombardments on border villages and vital infrastructure, which are calculated to force out local people and generate wider instability. On Wednesday, Rojava Information Centre reported, "According to local sources, the Tel Tamir & Zirgan areas have been shelled by [Turkish backed Syrian National Army] forces 458 times across the past 3 days. The shelling targeted dozens of villages, damaged or destroyed dozens of civilian houses, & killed 1 civilian & wounded 9 others, including 2 children. Additionally, [a Syrian Army] soldier was killed & 3 Assyrian Khabour guards were wounded. Over 40 shells from Turkish-occupied territory hit a number of villages in northern Shehba yesterday evening. 4 civilians were wounded in Sheikh Issa. 15 more shells hit the city of Tel Rifaat."

In Iraq

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey is continuing to attack the PKK mountain bases with unprecedented ferocity, and the guerrillas report frequent use of chemical weapons. Despite this, Turkey has not been able to achieve the victory over the PKK that they crave. However, thanks to the support of the peşmerga attached to the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which increasingly acts as Turkey's vassal, Turkish military control has spread over large areas of northern Iraq. It is clear that, whatever happens in the fight against the PKK, Turkey's military bases are there to stay. Turkey has no intention of allowing any future possibility for development of real Kurdish autonomy – and these areas, too, are part of the National Pact territories to which they feel entitled.

As in Syria, Turkish tactics include attacks designed to drive away the local population through fear of physical danger and through destruction of their natural environment and their sources of livelihood – as has been carefully recorded by the independent NGO, the Community Peacemaker Teams (formerly Christian Peacemaker Teams). This would explain Turkey's attacks on tourist areas. Turkey and the KDP attempt to redirect resultant local anger towards the PKK, either by claiming the PKK's direct involvement, or by arguing that the PKK presence necessitated the Turkish attacks. When the victims were individual Kurds, others were prepared to turn a blind eye, but, ten days ago, Turkey massacred nine Iraqi tourists, including a baby and two other children, and ripples from this attack were felt in the UN Security Council, which convened an emergency session on Tuesday.

Baghdad demanded that Turkey withdraw all their forces from Iraq, and they called for a UN resolution that would oblige Turkey to do this, as well as for an international investigation. Turkey continued to insist, despite Baghdad's evidence to the contrary, that the attack was carried out by the PKK; and other contributors made general comments about obligations on "all parties" not to harm civilians and to respect Iraq's sovereignty – which seem even more insincere when coming from representatives of the US and UK.

Bianet reported that the Security and Defence Committee recommended that

Turkey should withdraw their troops and that the PKK should also be removed – but where to? There is little chance that any of this will be more than words.

Iraq's foreign minister told the UN meeting that, since 2008, they had made 296 complaints to Turkey about violations of the UN Charter, but without effect. And Roj News claims that Iraq's Border Guard Forces actually cooperate with the KDP and Turkey.

The inherent weakness of the UN was demonstrated just this week by the removal of a Tweet showing the President of the UN General Assembly, Abdulla Shahid, laying a wreath at the Tsitsernakaberd Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan. This disappeared from Twitter after complaints from the Turkish Government, which argues against all recognition of the 2015 genocide, when Turkey killed up to 1.5 million Armenians, and which claimed Shahid was being manipulated to "distort historical facts". International diplomacy does not seem to have moved on from when the perpetrators of the genocide were given immunity at Lausanne, 99 years ago.

Real change will depend on the balance of vested interests in Iraq's increasingly troubled politics. Amberin Zaman in Al-Monitor, suggests that Baghdad might try to use the public outcry to pressure Turkey to withdraw their troops from Bashiqa, near Mosul, their only base outwith the Kurdistan Region. She also notes that potential horse-trading could involve the dispute over oil revenues. Baghdad is now taking the KDP-dominated Kurdistan Regional Government to an international court over their 2007 law that assumed independent control of oil exports; and Turkey faces a potential \$24 billion fine for their key role in exporting the oil.

The KDP has some tricky manoeuvring to do between Baghdad and Ankara, and are also continuing to clamp down hard on their own critics. A letter published last Sunday by 52 imprisoned journalists and activists in Hewlêr (Erbil) announced that they were going on hunger strike to protest political interference in their right to conditional release. The hunger strikers state, "We are deprived of any human, legal and democratic right for all to see. We were sentenced because we demanded to be granted our rights and freedom of

thought. Some of us have been sentenced for opposing the invasion and bombing of our country. The government, on the other hand, is now crying crocodile tears for the victims of the Turkish bombardment.” On Thursday, Firat News Agency reported that two of the men arrested for organising a protest in Hewlêr against the Turkish attack were still in police detention, and there had been no information about them for four days.

Meanwhile, back in Baghdad, competing political groups have stymied attempts to form a new Iraqi government following the elections last October – including, on Wednesday, storming the parliament building. And Shia militants, who are worried by the growth of Turkish power, struck Turkish targets in Iraq, including the consulate in Mosul (no casualties), as well as the more usual military bases.

In Turkey

In Turkey itself, ninety-nine-year-old oppressions are still being played out. The Constitutional Court has ruled that no rights were violated when teachers were punished with ‘condemnations’ and salary cuts for responding to the call of their trade union and teaching their pupils about UNESCO’s International Mother Tongue Day.

There have been more detentions of political activists and of members of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) under the catch-all anti-terrorism laws. Four young people were detained in Antalya on Thursday. Also on Thursday, HDP members of Mersin Akdeniz Municipal council were taken into custody just before a crucial council meeting when they were expected to oppose borrowing plans being put forward by the government-linked administration. And seven HDP members were detained in Istanbul on Friday, and forbidden access to a lawyer for 24 hours.

A parliamentary committee has taken the next step in removing parliamentary immunity from prosecution from HDP Deputy, Saliha Aydeniz, who argued with the police when they blocked a march in June. In the heat of the moment, she touched the policeman, and Erdoğan has called for her immunity to be

removed quickly. She will join a long list of HDP deputies who have had their immunity taken away and been excluded from parliament.



Kurdish deputy Saliha Aydeniz.

This time, the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) was against the lifting of immunity – unlike their alliance partners in the İYİ Parti – but the CHP are by no means always ready to oppose government oppression. This week, the CHP-controlled İstanbul Metropolitan Municipality dismissed a former academic who had signed the Academics for Peace declaration against the human rights violations committed by the state during its 2015-16 conflict with the Kurds. And there has been a sit-in in front of Istanbul City Hall by workers who were dismissed by the municipality in compliance with some very politically motivated “security investigations” being carried out by the central government.

This week also saw another hearing in the Kobanê case, in which 108 people, including leading members of the HDP, face the prospect of life imprisonment without parole: another hearing and another round of irregularities, including not allowing the defence lawyers to make their defence. Not that this is likely to make a difference as the court is expected to do the government's bidding.

There were irregularities, too, in the “terrorism” case against the Kurdish Muslim organisation DİAYDER. A “secret witness” failed to recognise any of the people he claimed to know, and his statement that the Istanbul-based organisation was in Diyarbakir was greeted with laughter. He was also unable to reproduce any of the long account of Öcalan’s political paradigm that he had put his signature to.

For those convicted, the prison system is becoming increasingly harsh. The extent of physical torture cannot compare with the violence of the 1980s and 90s, but there is widespread use of isolation, which is calculated to prevent solidarity and induce mental breakdown. There have been many unexplained deaths and there were two more this week. These deaths are often recorded as suicide, but the circumstances make it difficult to know if people have been killed by mistreatment or killed indirectly through psychological pressures that make them take the ultimate step. Prisoners are expected to pay themselves for basic things such as electricity, cleaning materials, and milk. As everywhere, costs have gone up and prisoners are struggling to cope on the small sums they can earn.

The conference in Lausanne launched a year of actions in the run-up to the hundredth anniversary of the treaty. These actions will highlight the oppressions that Kurds still face as the result of that treaty and that in many ways are getting worse. They will also demonstrate resistance to those oppressions, inspired by the belief that the world can be made to stop repeating the same mistakes.

Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her website and follow her on Twitter.