

Grey Wolves on Europe's streets – a weekly news review

This week, Turkey brought their persecution of the Kurds to Europe, backing up their fascist thugs on the ground with high level diplomacy that reversed all blame onto the Kurds; and politicians and press were enticed into marching to the Turkish tune. The review also looks at the latest examples of lawfare from the Turkish courts, and recent news from Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

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Sarah Glynn

There have been more than enough reasons for Kurds to have no confidence in Western governments and politicians, nevertheless, the recent response by

the Prime Minister of Belgium following attacks by Turkish fascists on Kurds returning from celebrating Newroz in the city of Leuven are still shocking. Alexander De Croo has no obvious reason to distrust the Kurds, but he is a mainstream liberal politician, and, like others of his ilk, he is doubtless more concerned about the realpolitik of relations with Turkey than in unearthing the actual trajectory of a racist attack against immigrants in a small Belgian town.

Before looking at De Croo's comments, I want to roll the clock back to last Sunday, when Kurds in Leuven, like in many other cities, were celebrating the spring new year festival of Newroz, which has become a major festival of Kurdish resistance. An extended family of Kurdish refugees from Afrîn, the Rojava canton invaded and occupied by Turkey in 2018, were on their way back home to the small town of [Heusden Zolder](#), which has a large Turkish population, when they were stopped from driving down the road by a young Turkish man who objected to the Kurdish flags on their cars. They pushed him out of the way, but he contacted others who tracked the Kurds down, and before long hundreds of Turks had surrounded the home where around forty family members had taken refuge, and were threatening to burn it down. The attackers were making the hand signs of the Grey Wolves, the fascist paramilitary youth organisation attached to the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) the junior partner in Turkey's ruling coalition, and were shouting Allahu Akbar, as though attacking Kurds were a religious act. As videos of what was happening spread on social media, other Kurds rushed to the scene to defend the people in the house, and groups of Turks [started](#) to roam the streets looking for more Kurds to attack. Videos of individuals being kicked and beaten were posted online, encouraging others to join in the hunt. The local police were slow to respond with sufficient force to quell the violence and at least six Kurds were hospitalised.

Further attacks have [targeted](#) Kurdish-owned businesses, and bands of Turks have been setting up roadblocks to stop Kurdish cars in order to find more people to attack and to create an atmosphere of terror. Groups of young Turkish men have been posting pictures of themselves armed with machetes and firearms, and calling for more violence in Belgium and Germany and other European cities this weekend and following Friday's midday prayers.

Kurdish responses

Kurdish organisations, such as the [European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress](#), have warned their compatriots not to be provoked, but they were too late to prevent some retaliatory attacks on centres used by the Grey Wolves. While this reaction is understandable, it plays into the hands of the Turkish government, which always paints the Kurds as aggressors; indeed, it has been argued that the initial Turkish attacks were deliberately pushed by the Turkish government with a view not only to terrorise but also to [provoke](#) the Kurds into violence and so damage their reputation. Kurdish anger at what was seen as an inadequate response from the police spilled over into aggression at the demonstration against the Turkish attacks that was held outside the European Parliament on Monday, so that press headlines highlighted the violence rather than the reason for the protest.

Through Turkish lenses

Pressure on the Kurds was increased by the deputy mayor of Heusden Zolder, Yasin Gül, who is a Turk and an outspoken supporter of the Grey Wolves. Gül claimed on CNN Turk that the cars with Kurdish flags were intended to “provoke our people during Ramadan”, and “Of course, national and religious sensitivities are very high in this region. That is why our citizens could not remain silent in the face of such a [provocation](#)”. Is this another case of someone revealing through their accusations of others, how they are thinking themselves?

On Tuesday, Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs [publicised](#) their own distorted image of the events, with a statement entitled “Regarding the Attacks by PKK Militants Against Turkish Citizens Living in Belgium”. It begins, “On 24 March 2024, PKK militants gathered in Leuven, Belgium, carried out attacks targeting Turkish citizens living in the cities of Heusden-Zolder and Hauthalen.” After making sure to praise the Belgian security authorities, it concludes “These incidents once again prove that the PKK terrorist organisation is a threat to social peace and public order in Western Europe.” The Ministry also noted that the Turkish Foreign Minister (and ex head of the secret service) Hakan Fidan

had talked on the telephone with his Belgian opposite number on Sunday night. On Tuesday night, President Erdoğan made a videoed interview with a 16-year-old Turkish boy who had been hurt in the violence.

The Prime Minister of Belgium

By Wednesday, when Prime Minister De Croo gave his comments on the violence, following a meeting of the National Security Council, the authority of the Turkish state had ensured that he would not only fail to blame the Turks and their Turkish Government-endorsed fascism, but that he would instead effectively blame and smear the Kurds they had [attacked](#). He called for “provocations and violence to stop”, as though both Turks and Kurds were equally complicit, noting, “People are free to have opinions and thoughts, but expressions of support for terrorist organisations will not be tolerated”. And, despite the ruling by the Belgian Court of Cassation that the PKK should not be seen as a terrorist organisation, but rather as a party in a non-international armed conflict, he added that “The PKK is considered to be a terrorist group in Europe.”

The media

International media, including Agence France Presse, whose [report](#) was syndicated around the world, gave prominence to De Croo’s statement, and the impression given is of tit for tat attacks provoked by PKK “terrorists”. There is no attempt to contextualise these events in a century of Turkish anti-Kurdish violence, nor to acknowledge that the Grey Wolves has become one of the biggest Far-Right organisations in Europe, where it is being helped by the Turkish government to indoctrinate a new generation of immigrant Turks.

Belgium’s Interior Minister, Annelies Verlinden, [commented](#) that “foreign disputes should not be imported into Belgium”; and the violence has [provided](#) fuel for the anti-immigrant Right.

Turkey's Tactics

While the way events have unrolled may be opportunistic rather than planned, it is clear that the Turkish Government has deliberately put the pieces into place to maximise opportunities to harass and provoke Belgium's Kurds. The week before the attacks, Hakan Fidan had visited Belgium, and his agenda [included](#) meetings with Belgian ministers, and also with Grey Wolves associations. Turkey is preparing for two major events: tomorrow's local elections, and a much-trumpeted spring or summer invasion into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) coalition want to rally their voters, and also to persuade other countries that their military incursions are justified. Fidan's meetings allowed him to address both those issues directly, but he may have been promoting them, too, by encouraging Grey Wolf thugs to attack the Kurds in the knowledge that some Kurds would be provoked into a violent response. This could then be used to delegitimise them all, both in the eyes of Turkish citizens and internationally. [Nilüfer Koç](#) of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) sums up these concerns in a Tweet calling on people to avoid Turkey's trap: "Refrain from violence. Erdogan's henchmen like the gray wolves want to instigate chaos two days before the local elections in Turkey and Kurdistan. They want to damage the positive image of us Kurds in Europe."

Belgium and the Kurds

Belgium is an important place for the Kurds. Much Kurdish diplomatic and media activity is based there, close to the European Parliament, but also in a relatively liberal political environment. The court ruling in the PKK terrorism case provides a level of protection against politically inspired arrest, however, nowhere is free from Turkish political influence. Two years ago, four men were put on trial for plotting the [assassination](#) of two prominent Kurds staying at the KNK in Brussels in 2017. Despite a huge amount of detailed evidence on this case, and on links with the assassination of three Kurdish women activists in Paris in 2013, the accused were acquitted on the grounds that the evidence was insufficient. The [Belgian state](#) prosecutor had always been

reluctant to proceed, and the lawyer for the Kurds was certain that the decision was a political not a legal one.

The Grey Wolves

The dangers of the Grey Wolves are well known, but this has not been allowed to interfere with political relations with Turkey. A 2021 EU resolution on Turkey noted that the parliament “Is highly worried that the racist right-wing extremist Ülkücü movement, known as ‘Grey Wolves’, which is closely linked to the ruling coalition party MHP (the Nationalist Movement Party), is spreading in Turkey itself, but also in EU Member States; calls on the EU and its Member States to examine the possibility of adding Grey Wolves to the [EU](#) terrorist list, to ban their associations and organisations in EU countries, to closely monitor their activities and to counter their influence, which is especially threatening for people with a Kurdish, Armenian or Greek background and anyone they consider an opponent”. No significant action has been taken. Even in France, which banned the organisation in 2020, the [Grey Wolves](#) have been continuing to function openly.

Turkish Lawfare

The attacks in Europe are part of Turkey’s comprehensive campaign against the Kurds, which also includes cross-border attacks in Iraq and Syria, and oppression within Turkish borders. Within Turkey, the deeply compromised judiciary provides an important tool.

This week, ten members of the (pro-Kurdish, Leftist) DEM Party Youth Assembly were [detained](#) in house raids; and over 30 more people were [detained](#) in house raids in Şırnak and Urfa. Two young DEM Party members were [tortured](#) by police when they were overheard having a private conversation as they walked down the street, in which they criticised President Erdoğan. Three people, two of them minors, were [arrested](#) for commemorating a prisoner who sacrificed herself in the 2019 hunger strike. An academic was detained for three days, and is now under judicial control with a travel ban, on the grounds that one of the people she [interviewed](#) for her research was under “technical surveillance”. Four political activists taken

into custody on 19 March were [sent](#) to prison. Twelve former members of the HDP (the DEM Party's predecessor) were given suspended five-month sentences for "publicly degrading the Turkish Republic" after calling people to face the "shame of the [Armenian Genocide](#)". And just over a week ago, 75-year-old Hatice Yildiz was sent to prison for four years for sending money to her [imprisoned](#) daughter – which was not previously considered a crime. Yildiz has many health problems and was taken from her home in a primitive stretcher.

The Turkish judiciary has yet again ignored the European Court of Human Rights: this time by confirming the acquittal of police officers accused of causing the [deaths of boys](#) aged 8 and 14 in 2006 by firing a teargas cannister. And the Kulp case, concerning the disappearance and killing of eleven people in 1993, has been dismissed as outwith the statute of limitations after being delayed in the court system.

The politicised judiciary and appalling treatment of prisoners should prevent other countries from extraditing dissidents back to Turkey, but this has not been the case. France has shown an especial disregard for Kurdish wellbeing this week. Last week I talked about two Kurdish asylum seekers threatened with deportation to Turkey and Turkish prison. On Wednesday the younger of the two, Firaz Korkmaz, was [escorted](#), bound and gagged, onto a plane at Charles de Gaulle Airport and flown to Istanbul. There were elected representatives among the protestors at the airport – conspicuous by their tricolor sashes – but the authorities were unmoved.

Despite Turkey's internal oppression and external aggression, Erdoğan has now [received](#) his long-coveted invitation from the Whitehouse. The visit will take place in May, and news of this seems to have been leaked to boost the AKP's election prospects.

Syria

Turkey's forced deportations of Syrian refugees have come under attack from Human Rights Watch who have looked at the appalling conditions that the

refugees are facing in Turkish occupied Girê Spî (Tel Abyad). Adam Coogle, the organisation's deputy Middle East and North Africa director explains that "Türkiye's 'voluntary' returns are often coerced returns to '[safe zones](#)' that are pits of danger and despair".

Last Saturday, the Syrian Democratic Forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria celebrated the fifth anniversary of the defeat of the ISIS caliphate, but they also used the occasion to stress that ISIS remains a threat, noting the importance of physical reconstruction, and the need to deal with the ISIS prisoners and with the camps of ISIS wives and children. They observed that, "There is no doubt that the attacks by the Turkish occupying state and its mercenaries on our areas provide ISIS with all the means to rebuild its ranks and become more dangerous. We have proven with conclusive evidence that the Turkish-occupied areas are a hotbed for ISIS elements, from where they plan their attacks on our areas and receive the necessary support from the Turkish state to carry out its terrorist [operations](#)." ISIS are believed to have been responsible for an attack on Raqqa Military Council's office on Wednesday, which [killed](#) two security officers.

Iraq

Turkish bombing and shelling of northern Iraq and northern Syria does not stop. The Community Peacemaker Teams in the [Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#) explain that this is in preparation for Turkey's planned major attack, and that "The aim of the bombings is to pressure and force the villagers and civilians in Gara mountain to leave so that Turkey can establish and control a larger area to conduct their operations."

There was much speculation, following a briefing by the Turkish Defence Minister, over a possible agreement on joint operations between Iraq and Turkey; but this was firmly [denied](#) by Iraq.

In yet another legal case, the Iraqi Ministry of Migration is taking the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Barzani family to court for obstructing the return of [displaced](#) Yazidis to Sinjar. Large numbers of Yazidis have been living in

camps since fleeing ISIS in 2014, and there has been strong support for the prosecution.

Meanwhile Bafel Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), has been visiting Moscow, where he is [said](#) to be asking the Russians to help him improve relations with Turkey.

Iran

In further testaments to the inhumanity of the Iranian government, we read of a singer, Hassan Kakai, detained and assaulted after [performing at Newroz](#), and of a [prisoner](#), Nayeab Askari, facing probable execution because of his membership of a Kurdish political party.

The cruelty of Iranian society is tragically illustrated by the story of 22 year-old Soran Abdi. Abdi was married and was soon to be a father, and he had ambitions to be an actor. As a boy, he had had a role in the award winning film, Farewell Analog, but the people of the Kurdish region have little opportunity to fulfill their dreams. Like so many others, Abdi was [forced](#) to become a kolbar – a mountain porter eeking out a living carrying huge loads over the dangerous border passes. On Monday he was shot through the chest by an Iranian border guard, and his life and dreams were extinguished.

Despite the dreadful things that happen to critics of the Iranian Government, Turkey is increasing deportations of refugees back to Iran. A Kurdish couple, Reshad Mohammadi and Azhin Fahmideh Hosseini had hoped to go on to Europe. Instead they have been [detained](#) by the Turkish authorities and fears are growing that they will be taken over the border.

Abdullah Öcalan

I will end this week by recalling that on Monday it was three years since Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan was last able to communicate with anyone from outside his prison. <https://ocalanvigil.net/2024/03/25/three-years-with-no-news/> This isolation is a form of torture and is illegal under international

and Turkish law. It blocks the way to negotiations for a peaceful future for Kurds and Turks, and it denies humanity access to a vital thinker. Activists in South Africa have started a campaign to call on Amnesty International to support this most important political prisoner. Please [sign and share!](#)

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