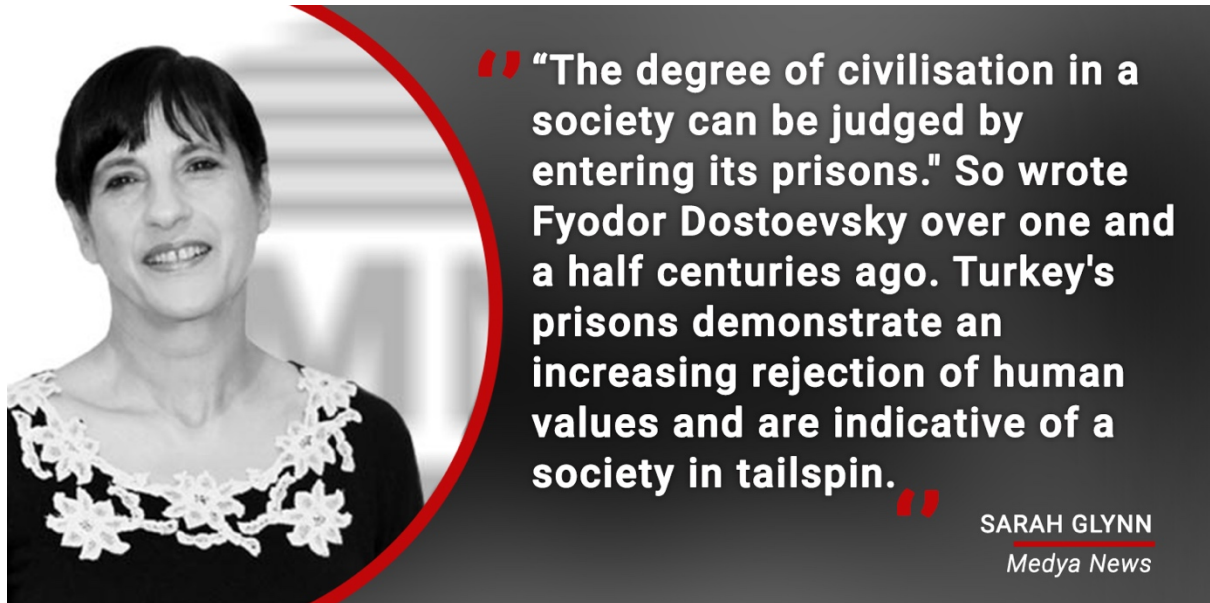


# Discipline and punish – a weekly news review

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“The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.” So wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky over one and a half centuries ago. Turkey’s prisons demonstrate an increasing rejection of human values and are indicative of a society in tailspin. Meanwhile, President Erdoğan responds to falling popularity – the only form of crisis he really cares about – with plans for more war against Turkey’s Kurdish neighbours. Another window into the character of Erdoğan’s Turkey is provided by the discussions over his visit to Glasgow for COP26. These are not about saving humanity from extinction due to climate change – the subject of the conference – but of a possible arms deal with President Biden.

This week began with a diplomatic spat that threatened serious repercussions for Turkey’s foreign and trade relations. Last Saturday, five days after a joint

letter by ten Western ambassadors called for the release of imprisoned philanthropist Osman Kavala in line with the ruling by the European Court of Human Rights, Erdoğan declared that he had ordered his foreign minister to declare the ambassadors 'persona non grata'. But while people wondered whether the minister would act on this instruction and throw the ambassadors out of the country, the embassies, led by the US, let Erdoğan off the hook. Erdoğan had portrayed the letter as unacceptable interference. The US embassy put out a tweet confirming that the US "maintains compliance with article 41 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations", which imposes a duty on diplomats not to interfere in a host state's internal affairs, and other embassies retweeted this or shared similar statements. As the US later made clear, they were not technically backing down, but clarifying that their original letter was consistent with article 41; however, this was not the impression given by Turkey's highly controlled media. The tweet allowed Erdoğan's high risk posturing to be presented as a show of strength, as the president announced that the embassies had taken a 'step back' from 'this slander against our country'. Kavala himself, and anyone who cares about human rights, can only hope that the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers takes a clearer stand against Turkey's Machiavellian politics. This is the body tasked with following up on European Court of Human Rights decisions. When they meet at the end of November, they will need to carry through their pre-announced plans and vote to begin infringement proceedings against Turkey.

Even before Erdoğan's latest threats, Kavala had announced that the president's interference made a fair trial impossible and that he will no longer defend himself and give the process legitimacy.

The 108 members of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) currently facing "terrorism" charges have even less reason to expect a fair trial, but they have made the tactical political choice to continue to use the court to highlight the state's attacks on democracy and human rights.

Another consequence of Turkey's politicised justice system is the clear bias in whether cases are investigated and how thorough those investigations will be. Sometimes lack of judicial action is simply an example of the authorities protecting their own. Sometimes it suggests more active state involvement.

On Monday, HDP lawyers accused the judicial authorities of a 'chain of weaknesses' in their response to the murder of Deniz Poyraz, who was killed in an armed attack on the HDP's İzmir office in June. The lawyers outlined a long list of failures, starting with failure to prevent the attack, and continuing with failures in investigation, in filing the case without waiting for all the evidence, and in not looking at the political dimension and the accused's organisational links.

The state's apparent leniency in cases of crimes committed against Kurds – and also against women – is matched by an increasingly brutal approach towards political prisoners, both those convicted and those waiting constantly postponed trials.

Recent reports on the conditions in Şirnak T Type Prison and in the prisons of Central Anatolia describe a system designed to inflict mental and physical injury and cause permanent damage to prisoners' health. The Şirnak report describes overcrowded cells, inedible food, shortage of water, inadequate cleaning materials, problems of accessing healthcare, and strip searches carried out on both prisoners and their visitors – especially women. On Monday, it was reported that prisoners in Şirnak had been beaten on the face and head for refusing to sing the national anthem, with some left needing surgery. The Anatolia report describes how even seriously ill prisoners are not allowed to leave prison, and how nothing is done to help those too sick to look after themselves. It describes physical torture, and also solitary confinement and restrictions of social activities and communication – even the stopping of access to a newspaper. It notes the reduction of visits and phone calls. Perhaps cruellest of all, it describes the arbitrary deferral of prisoners' release. Turkey's use of life imprisonment without possibility of parole already falls outside the European Convention on Human Rights, which prohibits "torture and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment". This malicious destruction of hope must qualify as another form of torture.

On Monday, HDP politicians submitted written questions to parliament on the case of Garibe Gezer, who has been detained since 2016. In prison, Gezer has suffered periods of solitary confinement of up to 22 days, and physical and sexual violence. When she responded by attempting to take her own life, she

was denied proper medical treatment, and she reports that some of her letters are being blocked or censored.

As I was writing this article, followers of Turkish news witnessed another example of authoritarian oppression played out on Twitter. First, we saw a video of Cemil Taşkesen, a Kurdish shop owner in Siirt, speaking to the leader of the Good Party (İYİ) and telling her, ‘our language is rejected, our identity is rejected, Kurdistan is rejected, but the place you find yourself now, is Kurdistan’; then a video of his detention on charges of “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation”.

The mass incarceration of political opponents and their treatment as less than human is all part of Erdoğan’s war for power and control, in which the Kurds are double enemies – the first time for being Kurds and the second for being the major source of resistance against dictatorship and imperialist aggression.

This week also saw Turkey move a step closer to a new assault in the external part of this war. On Tuesday, the Turkish Parliament voted to extend the mandate for Turkish troop deployment in Iraq and Syria for a further two years. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government and its Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) allies have a majority, so there was never any doubt that the motion would pass, but, unlike on previous occasions, the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) joined the HDP in voting against it, providing a glimmer of hope for a different sort of future. The CHP’s election allies, the İYİ, showed their nationalist roots and voted for the extended mandate, though at the same time they called for peace negotiations with Damascus. The mandate motion lumps together the PKK, the YPG, the SDF and ISIS as ‘terrorist’ groups acting against Turkey, and it allows for “the presence of foreign forces and their use according to principles defined by the president”.

As even more Turkish military hardware pours into Syria, and armchair pundits speculate on possible Turkish deals with Russia and whether the US will do anything to prevent a major Turkish attack, it is salutary to remember what Turkish occupation means. The Human Rights Organisation in Jazeera has

published a report on the situation in the areas around Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî since they were invaded by Turkey two years ago. It makes for depressing reading, with descriptions of the same dystopic gang-rule that has become horribly familiar through accounts from Turkish-occupied Afrîn. Alongside the gratuitous violence, the torture, the kidnappings, the suppression of women, the widespread looting, and the deliberate destruction of archaeology and non-Muslim religious sites, the report charts the illegal transfer of residents to be tried and imprisoned in Turkey, and the resettlement of militants – including members of ISIS who have escaped from the camps at Al Hol and Ain Issa. It talks about the Alouk pumping station, where Turkey has cut off the water supply to the population of Al-Hasaka, and of the appalling conditions in which thousands of displaced families are having to survive.

Turkey's occupation in Northern Syria and brutal water embargo was raised this week in the Security Council of the United Nations. China's Deputy Permanent Representative, Geng Shuang, cited Turkey's responsibility for the cuts to supply from the Alouk pumping station and also for the decrease in the water level in the Euphrates, and called on Turkey to comply with international humanitarian law. This is especially notable as the report on combatting the devastating impacts of the water crisis that was drawn up by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs avoids mentioning Turkey's deliberately destructive role, and so cannot address a major source of the problems.

The nightmare in Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî was blamed on President Trump's readiness to accommodate Erdoğan, but will Biden prevent a new nightmare? And what will he talk about when he meets the Turkish president in Glasgow? Erdoğan has told reporters that the F-35 issue will be top of their agenda. Turkey was suspended from NATO's F-35 fighter jet programme when they bought the Russian S-400 defence system, however they had already paid \$1.4 billion. Now they are trying to negotiate a payback that includes new F-16 fighter jets and modernising kits for their existing aircraft, but there is resistance to this in the US Congress.

Even without a major ongoing Turkish campaign against North and East Syria, Turkey's attacks never stopped. Last week, Turkish drones carried out another attack on Kobane, killing three SDF fighters who had gone to the city for medical treatment.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has no air force and cannot survive a Turkish attack if Russia and the United States allows Turkey use of the air space. This has led to much discussion of what would happen if the United States were to withdraw their forces from the region, as they did from Afghanistan. Syrian Kurds have not forgotten their second-class treatment under the Assad regime, but the Autonomous Administration is clear that they do not seek independence from Syria. At the same time as fighting alongside the Americans against ISIS, they have kept up negotiations with Damascus and with the Syrian regime's Russian backers. They have no illusions that any of the countries they are dealing with look beyond their own self-interests. Although Russia doesn't want to see Turkish gains, they are happy for the Autonomous Administration to be put under pressure and left with few options.

In a recent interview with the Lebanese newspaper, al Nahar, Cemil Bayik, leading member of the PKK and co-chair of the Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union (KCK), stressed the importance of the relationship with Damascus. Since the US promotes the destruction of the PKK, while Hafez al-Assad, father of current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, provided the PKK with a safe haven in Syria for many years, this is perhaps unsurprising. Bayik stated that they have tried to use their influence to encourage good relations between the Autonomous Administration and Damascus, and that Syrian talk of decentralisation and education in Kurdish opened the door for this. The question is, of course – as Bayik must be aware – how much of their hard-won autonomy can the Administration retain? Neither Assad nor Putin – nor Biden – is going to be an enthusiastic supporter of Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of democratic confederalism, which underlie the system that the Administration is working to establish.

Iran's imperial ambitions in Syria are much less talked about, but they add another destabilising factor to the mix. In the Deir ez-Zor region, just across

the Euphrates from the Autonomous Administration, militias backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps are setting up offices from which to recruit fighters and spread their beliefs. High salaries are an important persuasive factor, especially in an area where money is scarce.

In Iran itself, the Washington Kurdish Institute recorded that "The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) released three reports claiming the Iranian regime is attempting to change the demography of Iranian Kurdistan." These included settlement of Turkish families in Mehabad.

As the world waits for Turkey's next move in Syria, the battle continues in their never-discussed war in northern Iraq/South Kurdistan. As well as heavy fighting, Firat News Agency records Turkey's destruction of South Kurdistan's natural environment. On the eve of COP26, we see images of piles of wood from cut down trees, ready to be transported to Turkey. Thousands of trees have been removed and acres of land burnt.