

Nowhere is safe – a weekly news review

[11:33 am 31/07/2021](#)



Sarah Glynn

I hesitate to write about attacks on Turkey's enemies abroad because the sense that nowhere is safe is precisely what the Turkish government wants to convey, but if this politics is to be rebuffed, it also has to be known and widely condemned. Last week, I wrote about warnings given to exiled journalists in Germany that their names are on a 55-person hit list. Also on the list is Kurdish musician, Ferhat Tunç, and the former Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) MP, Hasip Kaplan. This is a problem with a long history, and Kaplan commented “my name's been [on hit lists] for 40 years, it's nothing new!” The most recent lists have been raised in the German parliament, and the German Federation of Journalists has called for police protection for those listed, but there seems no reassurance that the next news won't be more troubling.

And, meanwhile in Wales, Gökhan Yavuzel, a writer who had already informed the police that his name was on a list of 21 targets in Europe, was beaten up in the park near his home in Cardiff. His four attackers hurled insults and threats in Turkish and told him “We can kill you all if we want.”

In a podcast for Ahval’s Turkey Abroad, researcher Serdar San reminded listeners of the range and extent of Turkey’s transnational repression, especially since the major clampdown following the 2016 coup attempt. This includes extraordinary renditions – especially from states with weak democratic institutions – abuse of Interpol procedures, co-option of the local police and security services, and passport cancellations. Serdar points out that these actions can also have a corrosive effect on the host countries, encouraging bribery and corruption and undermining democracy and the rule of law.

It is also well known that the Turkish secret service (MIT) watches critics of President Erdoğan abroad, and has hundreds of agents organising surveillance of the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora in Germany. There is even an app for members of the diaspora to report others to the Turkish government. Turkish ethno-nationalist organisations are spreading militant Turkish supremacism to a new generation of diaspora Turks through clubs and sports societies. And the mosques and associated organisations run by Turkey’s increasingly powerful and well-funded State Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) also report on community members who are critical of the government. There are almost a thousand Diyanet mosques in Germany alone, with imams who owe their jobs to the Turkish Government. There have been some court cases and expulsions, but nothing that seriously disrupts operations.

Sometimes, though, Turkey’s actions are impossible to ignore, such as when Turkish security forces violently attacked peaceful protestors when Erdoğan visited Washington in 2017. Some protestors launched a civil case against their attackers, and this week the federal appeals court rejected Turkey’s attempt to get the case dismissed. On behalf of the three judges who made the unanimous decision, Circuit Judge Karen LeCraft Henderson wrote: “The

nature of the challenged conduct was not plausibly related to protecting President Erdoğan, which is the only authority Turkey had to use force against United States citizens and residents.” Federal charges against most of the attackers were dropped under Trump. The Hill comments that the dropping of the charges “coincided with the release of an American pastor held in a Turkish prison”.

This week has produced some positive movement with respect to US foreign policy – albeit of the too little too late variety. On Wednesday, the Biden administration signalled their break from Trump’s capitulation to Turkey by announcing sanctions against Ahrar al-Sharqiyah, the Turkish-backed militia that murdered Hevrîn Xelef. How much of an impact this will have is unclear, though it should exclude the group from political processes and make life a bit more difficult for their business empire. Xelef’s mother, Souad Mohammad, commented: “It’s an important step. So, I thank the Biden administration. However, the real perpetrators, the real forces behind my daughter’s death, ought to be punished. I mean Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The leader of Turkey.”

This announcement followed last week’s introduction in the US Congress of a Turkey Human Rights Promotion Act, which would expect the President to impose sanctions on Turkish government officials responsible for human rights abuses.

However, the US continues to support Turkey’s intervention in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where Turkish forces are fighting to increase their area of military control in the northern mountains, and where Turkey has co-opted the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, to support their attacks against the PKK. Fears continue to grow that Turkey will succeed in engineering an intra-Kurdish war in which Turkey would be the only victor.

The PKK has been in those areas for decades – from before there was an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdistan Regional Government – and they claim that they are not only defending their own bases, but also protecting Kurdistan itself from an occupying state that has clearly demonstrated its

murderous contempt for all things Kurdish. To the PKK, the KDP's support for Turkey is not only a betrayal of the Kurdish people, but politically incomprehensible, as while Turkey's current target is the PKK, ultimately all Kurds are in their sights.

The PKK are not only being hammered by the second largest army in NATO, who have not hesitated to use chemical weapons to suffocate guerrillas in their mountain tunnels. They are also being forced into impossible choices by the forces loyal to the KDP. (Kurdish political groups in Iraq have retained their own military forces.) KDP agents report PKK positions to their Turkish counterparts, and KDP forces are moving into areas that have long been dominated by the PKK, and are encircling the guerrilla positions so to make it easier for Turkey to attack. If the PKK shows resistance, it is accused of attacking other Kurds, and the risk of a Kurdish 'fratricidal' war becomes greater.

On Saturday there was a brief direct clash between the KDP and PKK, as the KDP continued to push forward, building military checkpoints and roads in areas that have long been PKK strongholds. And on Thursday morning, the PKK guerrillas reported that they had received information from local people that a small group of their fighters, with whom they had lost contact, had been besieged by KDP-affiliated forces.

The tensions are exemplified by a brief report from Thursday afternoon of a KDP convoy, made up of civilian and armoured vehicles, attempting to enter an area that is under PKK control and called to stop by the guerrillas. Firat News Agency reports that the KDP "responded to the verbal warnings of the guerrillas by pulling out their guns" but that this time violence was prevented "by the intervention of the people in the region and the prudent approach of the guerrillas themselves."

The KDP's stance also plays an important role in legitimising the opposition to the PKK shown by the United States and Europe.

KDP hostility is not limited to the PKK within South (Iraqi) Kurdistan, but extends to everyone who follows Abdullah Öcalan's political philosophy,

including the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) across the border (which the US has found themselves in alliance with). On 10 June, the KDP detained the AANES representative in Helwê (Erbil), Cihad Hesên, along with two members of North and East Syria's Democratic Union Party (PYD). On Thursday, the PYD members were released without charge after fifty days in which there had been no contact with them. There is still no news of Hesên.

This abuse of human rights also extends to the region's own citizens. The KDP is alone in Kurdistan in its support for the Turkish invasion; however, is not easy to protest anything in what has become an increasingly authoritarian environment. Nalia Radio and Television (NRT) notes that the Metro Center for Journalists' Rights and Advocacy recorded "at least 385 violations against 291 journalists and media agencies during 2020, including assaults, arrests, office closures, and harassing lawsuits." On Thursday, the trial of an activist and a journalist on national security charges was postponed for two months after key witnesses – also activists and journalists who were imprisoned after a widely criticised trial in February – denied the statements attributed to them.

Human Rights abuses are usually the only news we get from Iran, but this week, amidst all the gloom, Kurdish culture was afforded some international recognition when the Zagros Mountain villages of Hawraman/Uramanat, in East (Iranian) Kurdistan, were recognised as a World Heritage Site. Quite what this means in a country where people can be shot for protesting a lack of water is unclear.

Meanwhile, Turkey has announced their intention to build a wall on their border with Iran to keep out the growing flow of refugees from Afghanistan, just as they have built a wall on their border with Syria. This is hardly a solution to what should be regarded as an international problem. It will also close down an option for those in the region who have been forced, through lack of alternatives, to take up the highly dangerous role of border porter, or kolbar.

Last week, I wrote about a spate of violent anti-Kurdish attacks. As I finished this article on Friday, news came in of an even more brutal attack in Konya,

that left seven members of a family dead and followed fifteen years of racist harassment and a violent mob attack on the same family in May.

The earlier attacks were condemned in a joint statement by 15 bar associations from south-east Turkey, which drew attention to the impact of “discriminatory language used by political power holders” and “lack of effective judicial activity” In yet another example of how any defence of the Kurds is immediately dismissed as “PKK”, the pro-government newspaper, Yeni Şafak, branded the bar associations as “Qandil’s BARons”, referring to the PKK’s bases in the Qandil Mountains. Diyarbakir Bar Association has now asked the public prosecutor to investigate the newspaper for trying to turn the bar associations into a racist’s target, and other bar associations across the country have come out in support of their fellow lawyers.

Racist sentiments have been further inflamed by the wildfires sweeping through Turkey’s forests. Rumour was quick to blame them on the PKK, and also the HDP, with #PKKyaktı – “PKK burned” – trending on Twitter. While there is not a shred of evidence to support this accusation, Turkish bombs can currently be seen causing fires in the forests of South Kurdistan (North Iraq), and the burning of Kurdish landscape is standard Turkish army practice. In this tense climate, a second attack took place on the HDP’s district organisation building in Muğla’s Marmaris district on Thursday night. The attacker was detained after breaking the windows.

I also wrote about the xenophobia of the Republican People’s Party (CHP) which is expected to provide the main opposition to government fascism. On Monday, the CHP mayor of Bolu, Tanju Özcan, promised to charge foreign nationals ten times as much as Turkish citizens for water and for the removal of waste, in order to drive away refugees. He claimed that he did not care if he was called a fascist, and he told Habertürk TV, “While my soldiers are martyred there [in Syria], Syrians are here on the streets, looking at people!” The CHP has tried to distance the party from this extreme version of their anti-refugee views, but Özcan has not been disciplined. The government is loving it.

All the time I have been writing these news reviews (I began last December) Kurdish political prisoners have been on hunger strike to try and force an end to Öcalan's isolation in Imrali prison, and also to demand an end to the human rights abuses that they are subjected to themselves. Öcalan's solitary confinement without access to his lawyers or his family is more than a human rights issue. He is the embodiment of the Kurdish freedom movement, and his total incarceration is a deliberate rebuttal of the hopes of Kurds everywhere. It is also a deliberate attempt to close the door on possibilities for a peaceful solution that could allow the Kurds to live in safety and dignity. This hunger strike, which has reached day 247, is a rotating hunger strike in which groups of prisoners take turns to go without food; but as they repeat their ordeal, serious health issues are coming to the fore. This week, ANF reported on some of the ways the prisoners' bodies are reacting, and also the worsening conditions that political prisoners are facing, including in the newest prisons where cells have been built as individual airless boxes.

Öcalan's lawyers have this week appealed to the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) over his illegal isolation. Their basic demands start with a call for the CPT to make an urgent visit to Imrali to visit Öcalan and the three other prisoners held there. Over the last four months, the lawyers have submitted 68 rejected applications to meet with their clients. Lawyers' and Human Rights Associations have also written an open letter to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers calling on them to monitor compliance with the European Court of Human Rights ruling that in condemning the prisoners to life without possibility of parole, Turkey has deprived them of the fundamental right to hope.