

Existential Questions in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq – a weekly news review

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Kurdish autonomy within Iraq was only achieved after decades of hard struggle. And, in 2017, an unrecognised referendum produced a nearly 93% vote for full independence. So, it is pretty startling to learn that a [new survey](#) in the region found that around half of their interviewees believe it would be better for the Kurdistan region to dissolve its autonomous structures and merge fully into Iraq.

As Kurdistan Watch [observes](#), this result “like the mass migration to Europe... is another form of the ultimate expression of frustration with the current situation.” The Kurdistan Region of Iraq provides unhappy proof that Kurdish freedom is about much more than having a Kurdish government.

Power and wealth in Iraqi Kurdistan is dominated by two political parties, each the preserve of a family, and each with their own Peshmerga forces and intelligence agencies. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of the Barzani family, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of the Talibanis are in fierce competition. In 1994 to 1998, this even erupted in a civil war, which left the KDP as the prominent force in Hewlêr and the north of the region, and the PUK the prominent force in Slemani and the south. Tensions are still intense and have been worsening, despite efforts by the United States to bring about a degree of cooperation. Amwaj Media observes that, “Current dynamics between the two parties have led to [concerns](#) that the Kurdistan region could return to the pre-2005 system, when the KDP and the PUK led two distinct, separate governments.” Some claim that this is already, de facto, the case. The two parties [managed](#) to come together for a meeting last Saturday, but the meeting planned for today has been cancelled.

Destructive competition between these two parties is matched by the rivalries within them, which can be further stoked from outside. In recent years, rivalry has been especially vicious within the PUK, in the power struggle between the cousins Bafal and Lahur Talibani, who became co-presidents of the party in 2020. By the summer of 2021, Bafal had succeeded in ousting Lahur from the joint leadership, but the feud between them was far from over. This week, Kurdistan Watch [recorded](#) increased tensions and skirmishes between them and between their supporters – including threats and attempted kidnap – with possible [intervention](#) by the KDP.

Corruption is endemic, and government accounting scanty. Kurdistan Watch [reports](#) a claim by an MP from the opposition Gorran Movement that, every day, over 70 million dollars is sent illegally from the region to Turkey using the traditional informal hawala system. They also [write](#) that the region’s prime minister, Masrour Barzani, owns a bank that is making vast sums from

carrying out money exchanges for the region's oil revenues, that a company owned by the prime minister is responsible for most private construction in Hewlêr and Duhok, and that the son of the prime minister competes for control of large construction projects with his second cousin, the son of the president.

Protests against this situation are suppressed, and people see little hope of change. Despite being fully aware of the extent of the corruption and of the region's democratic failures, the United States and European nations continue to give support and backing to the business-friendly government. Without a hint of irony, one of the recipients of the US State Department's Annual Global Human Rights Defender Awards is the legal team of the Badinan detainees. The State Department's official announcement explains that the detainees are "a group of journalists, activists, and protesters that Amnesty International stated were 'arbitrarily arrested' and 'forcibly disappeared' in Badinan (Duhok Province) in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region." And that "The team [represented](#) these high-profile cases at great personal and professional risk, facing intimidation efforts, harassment, and anonymous death threats."

The survey with which I began was carried out after two court cases with serious impacts for the region – though it found that only half the respondents were fully aware of these. On 25 January, the Iraqi Federal Court declared planned budget transfers from the Iraqi Federal Government to the Kurdistan Regional Government to be unconstitutional, so putting into jeopardy public sector salaries that have already [suffered](#) years of postponed, reduced, and missing payments. (Most of the 1,000 survey respondents, like a high proportion of the population, were government employees.)

And, last February, the Federal Court ruled that the Federal oil ministry should have overall control of all oil production and exports. Following on from this, the International Commercial Court in Paris has just issued a draft arbitration ruling in a case that is expected to castigate Turkey for enabling oil exports by pipeline from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq without the consent of Baghdad. This would have big [consequences](#) for the Kurdistan Region's oil revenues.

And, in this difficult legal climate, compounded by falling oil prices, the Trafigura Group has ended its oil deal with the Kurdistan Regional Government, leaving the region owing the trading house some \$273 million lent on the promise of future [oil deliveries](#).

The Kurdistan Regional Government's oil deals with Turkey have also ensured Turkish dominance over the region. Turkey has the power to turn off the region's source of funds if they want to put the Kurds under pressure – as they threatened to do following the 2017 referendum.

With the support of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Turkish dominance has been expanding both economically and militarily. Determined resistance by PKK guerrillas has prevented Turkey from achieving the control they crave, but the Turkish military has brought an end to normal life across Iraq's northern mountains. In a rare mainstream news article on 'Turkey's push into Iraq', Amina Ismail, for Reuters, observes that "Turkey's advances across the increasingly depopulated border of Iraqi Kurdistan attract little global attention... but the escalation [risks](#) further destabilising a region where foreign powers have intervened with impunity". Ismail reports concerns that the Turkish presence will encourage more interventions in Iraq from Turkey's rivals in Iran, as well as prompting violent resistance from pro-Iranian Iraqi militias. Attacks on Turkish bases in Iraq that are attributed to these militias have increased, and, just this Wednesday, rockets again [hit](#) the Turkish base in Bashiqa in the Nineveh region.

Iran

Like Turkey, Iran does not hesitate to carry out cross border operations. Early in the ongoing revolutionary protests, the Iranian military struck at the Iraqi bases of Iranian Kurdish groups – even though these groups had restrained from violent intervention in the struggle for fear of provoking even worse retaliation in Iran's Kurdish regions. Now, Iran has accused the Kurdish groups of working with Israel to carry out the drone attack that targeted a military facility in Isfahan last Saturday. Accusations of links with Israel are regularly used by the Iranian regime to attempt to delegitimise the Kurdish organisations, and this [accusation](#) could presage another cross-border attack.

Saturday's Isfahan attack led to a flurry of internet speculation, but the most likely agent appears to be Israel. There are claims that the facility has links to Iran's missile programme and that it has also been targeted in the past. The attack [coincided](#) with a major fire at an oil refinery in Azarshahr, leading to theories about linked attacks.

Also on Saturday night, Khoy, in Iranian Kurdistan, was hit by an earthquake. At least three people were [killed](#) and over 800 injured, and survivors have been camping outside to avoid dangerously damaged buildings and risks from the continued aftershocks. Temperatures are hovering around zero and there is a desperate need for tents, blankets, and basic foods. The regime's treatment of the survivors is symptomatic of their treatment of Iran's Kurdish citizens more generally. Reports [claim](#) that the authorities' first response was to dispatch anti-riot units, and water cannons have been used to disperse people looking for aid. There has been almost no official help, and the regime's security forces have been [reported](#) blocking the delivery of voluntary aid collected by people in neighbouring regions. The regime is fearful of protests, but they are further compounding the reasons for unrest.

And, despite all the crackdowns, Iran's revolutionary resistance goes on. Hengaw Organization for Human Rights [reports](#) that at least 182 Kurdish citizens were abducted and arrested by the Iranian authorities in January. Each week, when I write my news review, I check the latest Friday mass protest from Zahedan in Baluchistan. This week, a protester was photographed holding a placard that [reads](#) "Night raids are a sign of the establishment panicking".

Syria

Turkish attacks, and the threat of a full-scale Turkish invasion, continue to cast a dark shadow over North and East Syria, which is not brightened by talk of a possible rapprochement between Syria and Turkey.

This week, Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, followed Turkey's President Erdoğan in mentioning including Iran in Turkey's discussions with Syria. Iran had previously been part of three-way discussions on Syria with

Turkey and Russia, and Lavrov [described](#) their involvement as “absolutely logical”.

In an interview published last Sunday, Foza Yûsif, from the Presidential Committee of North and East Syria’s Democratic Union Party (PYD), examined the dynamics behind any agreement. She argues that, whereas Russia is keen to see an agreement, the Syrian government knows that Erdoğan is supporting talks only for the sake of the upcoming elections, and has no intention to withdraw from the areas Turkey has occupied. So, the Syrian government is [slowing](#) the talks down. Yûsif also claims that Turkey and ISIS are coordinating their actions in North and East Syria and attacking in parallel.

Turkey and Europe

Cross-border action is not restricted to neighbouring countries. Both Turkey and Iran have been accused of carrying out assassinations in Europe, and Turkey has proved adept at persuading European governments to help them silence opposition voices. Turkish blackmail over Sweden’s application to join NATO, over which Turkey has a veto as an existing NATO member, continues to bring Turkey results.

In his anxiety to please Turkey, Sweden’s chief NATO negotiator, Oscar Stenström, seems to have thrown caution and common sense to the wind. The Swedish solidarity committee for Rojava charts how a Swedish Radio interviewer asked Stenström if the PKK, as a Kurdish organisation, could be linked to the drug dealer known as the “Kurdish Fox” and to the spiral of violence in Stockholm. Purported links between immigrants and the rising crime rate were a staple of Sweden’s recent election that brought the right into power, but, as a Social Democrat as well as a diplomat, Stenström should have been wary. Instead, he went into evidence-free musing over possible connections between the PKK and Sweden’s drug trade. This was picked up in the Expressen under the headline, “Chief negotiator: Swedish gang crime finances the PKK”, and was soon being [quoted](#) in the Turkish media.

Sweden’s road to widened terrorist legislation started long before the NATO saga and the current right-wing government. It has taken many years because

it required a constitutional amendment with respect to freedom of association. However, the NATO negotiations with Turkey, in which the legislation has been specifically mentioned, have given it a renewed impetus, and make the proposed changes even more dangerous.

On Thursday, the Swedish government announced a plan to criminalise anyone who participates in a terrorist organisation in a way that is intended to promote, strengthen, or support the organisation. Their bill, which still has to be reviewed by the Legislative Council, is very ill-defined and potentially very broad and has set alarm bells ringing – from the Swedish Bar Association to the Church of Sweden. Mikael Westerlund, a lawyer writing in Aftonbladet, observes, “it can be concluded that the right-wing government is proceeding with a very far-reaching bill despite the fact that it has met with criticism. Furthermore, it is highly unclear which documents will be subject to criminal liability. The government has mentioned the bill to appease the regime in Ankara, which in itself is likely to cause concern.” And he [concludes](#), “This type of criminal law has no place in our democratic rule of law.”

Despite the readiness of Sweden’s politicians to override cherished human rights and throw the Kurds to the wolves, Sweden’s NATO application has hit a brick wall. This has been the situation since a far-right Islamophobe, Rasmus Paludan, burnt a copy of the Quran outside Turkey’s Stockholm embassy, while the Swedish authorities, in line with Swedish law on freedom of speech, allowed him to do so. Sweden’s foreign minister, Tobias Billström – no doubt braced by public opinion – discovered a bit of backbone and [told](#) Turkey that religion was not part of the trilateral deal on NATO membership that they had signed with Turkey and Finland.

Following his action outside the Turkish embassy, Paludan has burned another Quran in Copenhagen, and another far-right politician has [torn up](#) a Quran outside the Dutch government in the Hague. Turkey has opened an ex-officio investigation into the perpetrators of the burnings, the United States and several European governments have told their citizens visiting Turkey to beware of possible retaliatory terrorist attacks, and some Istanbul consulates were temporarily [closed](#). On Thursday, Norwegian police banned another planned Quran burning after Turkish protests, [claiming](#), “Burning the Koran

remains a legal way to express political views in Norway. But this event cannot be carried out for security reasons". All of which will serve as grist to Erdoğan's election mill.

Turkey

While Erdoğan has been posing as the defender of Islam, the opposition Nation Alliance has [launched](#) their Memorandum of Understanding on Common Policies. As was perhaps inevitable, considering the parties involved, it is very much a lowest common denominator programme for reversing some of Erdoğan's attacks on democracy, though even here it is insufficient. There is no plan, for example, to [deal](#) with judges who have acted against the law. As human rights lawyer, Erin Keskin, [put it](#), "its promises can at least partially correct the violations we experience today. But that's all." Root and branch reform was never on the table, but critics have noted that there is nothing in the 244 pages about the Kurdish Question. There is no amendment to Turkey's catch-all anti-terror law; nothing about reinstating the Istanbul Convention on Preventing Violence against Women, or about LGBT rights; and little attention to the huge problems of Turkey's brutal prison system, which is [driving](#) ever more prisoners to go on hunger strike in protest at their deliberately inhuman treatment.

Before the policy launch, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the largest party in the Nation Alliance, the Republican People's Party (CHP), answered questions on television. He made it clear that he did not support the closure of a political party in the run up to elections – as looks set to happen to the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – and that he believes that the HDP's former co-chair, Selahattin Demirtaş, is unjustly imprisoned. He even gave a positive answer to Demirtaş's [tweeted](#) question that suggested turning the Palace into a campus for women's equality. However, this approach is not shared by the CHP's main coalition partner, nor even by all members of the party.

The presidential and general elections, now expected to take place on 14 May, will be close, and the Kurds are predicted to be the king makers. If the Nation

Alliance is serious about winning the support of the HDP and getting Kurdish voters to support their presidential candidate, then they need to show that they will address Kurdish concerns and offer Kurds the chance of a peaceful dignified future.

Turkey's refusal to recognise Kurdish culture and difference dates from the foundation of the Turkish Republic a hundred years ago. The Treaty of Lausanne gave some recognition to religious minorities, but not to ethnic or cultural difference. Kurds were regarded as Turks. The same emphasis on religious difference was behind the League of Nations' ethnic cleansing in the name of peace, which forced around 1 ½ million Greek Orthodox Christians to leave Turkey for Greece, and around ½ million Muslims to make the opposite journey. The centenary of the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, which was signed on 30 January 1923, has [prompted](#) the sharing of many tragic accounts of uprooted families. Though not the first instance of population exchange, this was politically and legally influential. Lord Curzon, who was closely involved as British Foreign Secretary, described it as "a thoroughly bad and vicious solution, for which the world would pay a heavy penalty for a hundred years to come."

Finally, on a more positive note, the [petition](#) to remove the PKK from the European Union's terrorism list, a petition whose initial signatures included many politicians and lawyers, has now been [delivered](#) to Brussels, signed by three million people. The call for de-listing is backed by legal argument and is also a call for the peaceful political solution that Kurds crave.

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