

Waiting for the invasion – a weekly news review

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For everyone who cares about the Kurds, this is a worrying time, but how much more worrying for those who expect their homes and their hard-won freedoms to come under violent attack at any moment. The situation cannot be made any easier by the knowledge that most of the world seems supremely indifferent to their plight – even to its potential world-changing importance.

As last week, people of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria are bracing themselves, and preparing for Turkey's promised invasion. They now know that President Erdoğan's first targets are planned to be Tel Rifaat and Manbij, as he told his Justice and Development Party (AKP) on Wednesday; and that after clearing these of "terrorists", Turkey "will do the same to other regions step-by-step." Journalist, Amed Dicle, points out that this announcement was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the start of the operation to liberate Manbij from ISIS, undertaken by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) six years ago; and he observes that Turkey had no problem in accepting ISIS control of the town from 2014 to 2016, when it was supplied from across the Turkish border.

Manbij is a multi-ethnic city with an Arab majority, and since it became part of the Autonomous Administration, efforts have been focussed on incorporating the different ethnic groups and boosting good relations between them. Tel Rifaat had been under a different militant Islamist group – Liwa al-Fatah, which subsequently became part of the Turkish-backed "Free Syrian Army". The SDF took over control after a heavy Russian bombardment, also in 2016. Tel Rifaat was once largely Arab, but in 2018 it became home to many of the

people – mostly Kurds – who had been displaced from Afrîn by Turkey's invasion. The Autonomous Administration has a devolved and federal structure, and both areas are administered and defended by local people. Their defence forces are part of the SDF, but are separate from the Kurdish Peoples Defence Units (YPG) and Women's Defence Units (YPJ), which are required to keep out of the 30km border strip in line with the 2019 ceasefire agreements that Turkey signed with the US and Russia.

Manbij and Tel Rifaat are the missing pieces for Turkey's occupation of the border strip west of the Euphrates. Dicle speculates that Turkish forces would then come up through Ayn Issa to encircle and strangle Kobanê – hoping to avoid the backlash that would result from a direct attack on this iconic city of Kurdish anti-ISIS resistance. He also predicts that Manbij would put up a fierce battle.

Turkey's planned invasion would result in major loss of life and is calculated to destroy all that the Autonomous Administration has been carefully constructing. Addressing international forces, which are concerned primarily with their own interests, the Administration's Foreign Relations Co-chair, Ebdulkerim Omer, has explained that the war would mean "destroying the stability of the region and supporting ISIS gangs to reorganise themselves". He further notes that Erdoğan's planned ethnic cleansing would "cause long-term conflicts between the peoples of Syria."

Mazloun Abdi, General Commander of the SDF, has tweeted, "Any offensive will divide Syrians, create a new humanitarian crisis, and displace original inhabitants and IDPs. New escalation will also negatively affect our campaign against ISIS. We call on actors to prevent any new tragedies and support de-escalation."

Both the United States and Russia have bases in the region, and a Turkish ground invasion would need their forces to move out of the way. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, has repeated US opposition to "any escalation in northern Syria". His statement, given at a joint press conference with NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, was careful not to suggest any favouring

of the Autonomous Administration, and solely focussed on how an offensive might impact the fight against ISIS.

Manbij and Tel Rifaat are surrounded by Russian bases. A week ago, Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, told Russia Today that Turkey's involvement in Syria was "understandable". Russia likes to contrast its own position, as invited into the country by President Assad, with that of the United States, and Lavrov portrayed the American military as occupying "a large part of the eastern bank of the Euphrates", and "openly creating quasi-states, directly encouraging separatism, and exploiting the sentiments of a part of the Kurdish population". He not only delegitimises the US. He also misrepresents indigenous multi-ethnic demands for regional autonomy, as US-led schemes for Kurdish separatism.

On Thursday, for the first time, Russia put out a public statement calling for Turkish restraint and backing up the objections made by the Assad government: "We hope that Ankara will refrain from actions that could lead to a dangerous deterioration of the already difficult situation in Syria. Such a move, in the absence of the agreement of the legitimate government of the Syrian Arab Republic, would be a direct violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity" and would "cause a further escalation of tensions in Syria." On the ground, Syrian regime forces have been reported arriving in Tel Rifaat and the surrounding area.

Nevertheless, neither the US nor Russia has made an unequivocal commitment to prevent a Turkish attack; and deteriorating relations between NATO and Russia must also problematise discussion and coordination.

A lot has been written about Turkey's decision to operate a balancing act between NATO and Russia. For the Autonomous Administration, there is no choice. They must play a careful game with both, although they have a much less strong hand than Turkey, and are risking much higher stakes. This is a point that US-centric discussion can tend to ignore.

NATO's narrative

Meanwhile, Turkey continues to keep up the pressure on NATO through its veto on Sweden and Finland's NATO membership applications, and also through an increasingly bellicose stance towards Greece. Negotiations with the Nordic countries are ongoing, and ,so far, we have only heard possibilities of concessions but nothing definite. However, the answers given by NATO's Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, at the joint press conference with Blinken, are chilling in their misrepresentation. In response to a question about these membership negotiations, Stoltenberg stated, "All NATO allies are, of course, ready to sit down and discuss concerns, including the threats posed to Turkey by the PKK. This is terrorist threats, which, of course, is something we are taking very seriously. We know that no other NATO ally has suffered more terrorist attacks than Turkey, and that Turkey is an important ally not least because of its strategic geographic location bordering Iraq and Syria. They have been important in our fight against ISIS, and [are] also a Black Sea country close to Russia." It is hard to imagine how he could have fitted more disinformation into one short paragraph.

Turkey's role in the fight against ISIS was, and continues to be, an almost entirely negative one. Apart from a few token attacks, Turkey has provided ISIS with their main source of support. Only recently, captured ISIS militants have told how Turkey supported the ISIS breakout from Heseke prison in January, and a new report from Syrians for Truth and Justice records that seven of the escaping ISIS militants are known to have taken refuge in the Turkish-occupied Serêkaniyê region, with the help of a group in the Turkish-sponsored Syrian National Army. The Turkish-occupied areas are recognised as safe havens for ISIS cells. Brett McGurk former Special Envoy for the Coalition Fighting Isis, is under no illusions. He told CNN in 2019, "I ran the ISIS campaign. 40,000 foreign fighters, jihadis from 110 countries round the world, all came into Syria to fight in that war and they all came through Turkey... I was in Turkey more than any other country to have them seal their border, and they would not do it. They said they couldn't do it – but the moment the Kurds took part of that border it was totally sealed with a wall."

Turkey has indeed suffered large terrorist attacks, but these have been linked to ISIS. The victims were disproportionately Kurdish, and the government has been accused of complicity. In October 2015, well over a hundred people were killed and hundreds more were injured when two suicide bombers attacked a mass peace rally that was protesting against the government's war on Kurdish cities; and earlier that year, 33 people were killed when a suicide bomber attacked a group of young socialists getting ready to go and help with the reconstruction of Kobanê.

The PKK has been fighting for Kurdish rights for nearly 38 years, but, as the Belgian courts concluded in 2020, they are a party to a civil war and subject to the laws of war, not 'terrorists' subject to criminal law. They have also been demanding peace negotiations for more than half that time, so if NATO was really concerned about Turkey's future as a fair and democratic country, it could try and push for peace negotiations to be resumed and the Kurds' human rights to be respected.

Stoltenberg does, however, correctly locate Turkey's strategic geography, which is, of course, where the problems begin.

Holding power to account?

It has been predictably sobering to observe the poor level of media coverage given to such crucial events. Both how little coverage there is – it seems that Turkey's official rebranding as Türkiye is considered a much bigger news story – and (bar a few exceptions) the media's failure to interrogate the Turkish narrative. The prize for the latter must go to the Economist, which simply invited Erdoğan to write a guest column. Perhaps next week they will invite Putin... Since Erdoğan's piece is an article and not an interview, there can be no challenge to his outrageous claim that "Turkey has been a stabilising power and a force for good in the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Black Sea regions."

With his characteristic abrasive style, the Turkish president stresses the importance of NATO and of Turkey's role within it – taking a side swipe at France's President Macron – and states that NATO must reform to include

collective action against “terrorism”. (He specifically mentions terrorist financing, but doesn’t mention that Turkey itself has been placed on the Financial Action Task Force “grey list” for having “insufficient safeguards against money laundering, proliferation and terrorist financing”.) Erdoğan uses the pages of the Economist to reinforce his demands that the Nordic countries curb the activities of all “terrorist organisations” (for which Turkey’s definition is notoriously elastic) and extradite their members to face Turkey’s courts, and that they also end their arms embargo. He grandly claims that without these actions, their admission to NATO risks Turkey’s security and the organisation’s future.

For the Guardian, the main concern seems to be the forceful settlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey in what they describe as “buffer zones”. Of course, this is important, but it is only part of a much more worrying story – as they would learn if they talked to the people threatened with invasion.

A bad week for refugees and immigrants

This has been a bad week for refugees in the UK, too. On Tuesday, up to thirty Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees were deported back to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The Guardian reported that some had been in the UK for decades, and many had British children or grandchildren. One man, who came to the UK twenty years ago, told their reporter that some of the returnees had already received threats from people in Erbil. At the same time, the first removal notices have gone out to asylum seekers who will be relocated to detention centres in Rwanda under the controversial new system brought in by the hard-line Home Minister, Priti Patel, whose own parents were Ugandan-Asian immigrants. When some asylum seekers went on hunger strike in protest, the government sent one of them a letter threatening to deport them even sooner. The threat of being sent to Rwanda has prompted several asylum seekers to attempt suicide.

There are also asylum seekers on hunger strike in Poland – Kurds from Iraq and Turkey who are protesting prison-like conditions and slow procedures. The direct flights that brought crowds of migrants to the Belarusian-Polish

border last winter have been stopped, but migrant numbers are rising again, and the treatment meted out at this border is very different from that given to refugees from Ukraine.

In Germany it has been revealed that Kurdish associations have been illegally monitored by state intelligence agencies since 1994, and there are fears that information could have been passed onto Turkish intelligence.

Erdoğan is using the negotiations over NATO membership for Sweden and Finland to try and apply pressure to other European countries too, and make them clamp down on Kurdish demonstrations and the display of Kurdish flags. Last week, the Turkish government summoned the ambassadors of both France and Germany to protest about Kurdish demonstrations held in their respective countries. Activities are already restricted in many places, and any attempts at further restriction will need to be resisted.

The war in Iraq

Flags should be out in force on 11 June, which has been designated Defend Kurdistan Global Day of Action. When this day was first planned, the most urgent concern was Turkey's invasion into northern Iraq/south Kurdistan. Now, this could be overtaken by a Turkish invasion into Syria, but the Iraq invasion is still going on. There have been claims that, faced with constant setbacks, Turkey is resorting to further underhand methods, including black operations, kidnapping and torture, and spreading false information. There has also been a report of imam's being sent to Turkey for instruction in how to preach against the PKK. The Community Peacemakers Teams have calculated that, from 2015 to date, 112 civilians are known to have been killed by Turkish airstrikes in northern Iraq, and the actual number is believed to be much higher.

Turkish opposition

In Turkey itself, the epicentre of all these attacks, oppression continues against all opposition, with more detentions of journalists, activists and

politicians. On Tuesday, at least eleven women, including former co-mayors from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) and activists from the Free Women's Movement, were taken into custody in house arrests. On Friday, a detention order was issued for 42 people, including politicians from the HDP and the Peoples' Democratic Congress (HDK), of which the HDP is part; and police raided an HDK building in Istanbul.

While the HDP is being targeted for total elimination, the politicised judiciary is also being used to hobble the Republican People's Party (CHP). On Tuesday, Canan Kaftancıoğlu, the CHP's provincial chair in İstanbul, who is credited with helping the party win the İstanbul mayorship in 2019, began her almost five-year prison sentence for social media tweets. This was an important political moment, even though she was released under supervision in the evening. Ekrem İmamoğlu, the man she helped get elected as mayor, is also facing a potential prison sentence – for “insulting public officials”. His case was due to be concluded on Wednesday, but was adjourned until September. Both politicians could face restrictions on political activity.

These events should create sympathy between the CHP and HDP – especially since HDP voters played a vital role in İmamoğlu's election. However, Erdoğan has lured the CHP into a trap that will make it hard for Kurds to support them. As has been repeatedly emphasised, an important impetus for Erdoğan's foreign aggression is to win popular support. When he beats the patriotic and anti-terrorism drum, he knows that the mainstream 'opposition' will fall in line behind him – and he has not been disappointed. On Wednesday, CHP Deputy Chairman, Engin Özkoç, gave a press conference where he answered ten questions from Erdoğan. Not only did he announce that the CHP supports all Turkey's cross border operations, but he also tried to outdo Erdoğan's militarism by castigating him for attempting peace negotiations with the PKK in the past – negotiations that Erdoğan himself eventually cut short and rejected. The Kurds have been described as kingmakers for the forthcoming election, but how can a Kurd vote for that?