

# The art of war – a weekly review

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Every movement has its favourite terminology that becomes normalised to insiders while being less than helpful to those unfamiliar with it. The Kurdish freedom movement is no exception. A term that is being used with growing frequency is ‘special war’, meaning all those many forms of attack that fall outside the idea of war as conventional physical confrontation. This extends beyond the actions of special operations forces, which are still part of the military, to include all forms of subversion and sabotage. Such actions have always been an integral part of warfare, and use of the term is not unique to the Kurdish movement, but it is chosen to draw attention to the many different ways that the Kurds are under attack.

This week I continue to look at Turkey's multifaceted and little-discussed war on the Kurds, which combines 'special war' together with military attacks, and I will examine some recent analyses of what is happening.

While Turkey continues to carry out conventional attacks against the Kurds on various fronts, these are generally kept small scale enough for the United States and other NATO powers to act as though they have not noticed. The exception is the offensive in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan, which the US has approved as an 'anti-terrorist' campaign against the PKK – although it shows all the characteristics of an occupation, with the routing of local villages and the establishment of a substantial military infrastructure. This portrayal of their actions as anti-terrorism is an important tactic of Turkey's 'special war'.

With actions outwith the Iraqi mountains being limited, the choice of targets becomes especially important. This is dictated not just by military strategy, which drives the attacks on places such as Ayn Issa on Northern Syria's important M4 road. It is also designed to weaken the organisation of the Kurds and their allies, to disrupt hopes for peaceful development and sow disillusion in the Kurdish movement, to drive away Kurdish people and disturb ethnic and religious harmony, and to wear down Kurdish morale by destroying those things that the Kurds most value – including their local landscape.

Metin Gurcan, writing in Al-Monitor last Friday, looked at how Turkey has been using drones and local intelligence in North and East Syria to target leading figures in the People's Protection Units (YPG) – and also the Women's Protection Units (YPJ), now both part of the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF). He observed that 'The YPG lost around two dozen members, including senior figures, in about 20 drone strikes that hit YPG targets last week, including vehicles carrying military commanders, meeting places and command centers.' Some of those hit were actually women fighters from the YPJ, including women who featured in a recent article in the Guardian by Elizabeth Flock, who tweeted 'In May I interviewed Zeynab, her commander Sosin & a seasoned fighter named Viyan. In the past 2 wks, Zeynab and Sosin have died in a drone attack & Viyan is wounded. We covered the YPJ obsessively when they fought ISIS; now that ISIS is lesser in Syria, we barely report on

them'. Gurcan argues that a large-scale conventional attack by Turkey would be diplomatically difficult to accept by Russia and the USA, so Turkey has opted for targeted killings in an attempt to weaken the Kurdish forces. He also suggests that these assassinations could have been facilitated by a deal with Russia that allowed the Russians to attack Idlib, while leaving Turkey a free hand in North and East Syria; and that the US may have been placated by Turkish help in the evacuations from Kabul. There is also a general sense that Turkey has exploited the fact that the worlds' attention has been focussed on Afghanistan.

Til Temir, which has borne the brunt of many of the recent attacks by Turkey's mercenaries, is not only on the vital M4, but is also home to the remnants of the town's former Assyrian Christian community who returned to their homes after the defeat of ISIS. The Assyrian Policy Institute observes, 'Turkey's offensive heightens threats to the future of the few Assyrians who remain and wish to rebuild'. While the Kurds value ethnic diversity, it is anathema to Turkey's ethnic nationalism. Many local people of all ethnicities have left the town for safety, which suits Turkey's plans for ethnic cleansing.

Every example of Kurdish resistance and independent organisation falls within Turkey's sights, with attacks calculated to ensure that it is impossible to build an alternative society in peace. So, Maxmur refugee camp in Iraq – which houses families that escaped persecution in Turkey in the 1990s and runs as an example of autonomous organisation – is a favourite target and was hit again yesterday, as is the Yazidi district of Şengal (Sinjar), which was hit again on Thursday evening.

If these small-scale attacks are also designed to test the reactions of the, so-called, 'international community', then Turkey will be delighted by the lack of response. The latest tweet from the United States is chilling in its weakness: 'The U.S. is deeply concerned with the intensification in airstrikes and shelling in northern Syria in recent months, leading to dozens of civilian casualties and displacements. We call on all sides to respect the ceasefire, protect civilian populations, and work toward a political resolution to the conflict as outlined by UN resolution 2254.' No mention of Turkey, just a mealy-mouthed reference

to 'all sides', as though the people they have lauded as partners in the fight against ISIS must be equally at fault for getting themselves bombarded in the places where they live.

Despite that UN resolution's platitudes about 'an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people', bringing together 'the broadest possible spectrum of the opposition, chosen by Syrians', and 'encouraging the meaningful participation of women', the US has never found a seat for its North and East Syrian allies at the international talks about the region's future. The Kurds and their neighbours can be praised for sacrificing thousands of fighters in the defence of humanity, but NATO politics excludes them from decisions over their own future and denies their Autonomous Administration international recognition.

No one can be more aware of the hollowness of US friendship than SDF Commander, Mazloun Abdi. He told the Washington Post, 'I know that the United States wants their troops here to fight the terrorists [i.e. ISIS], but they need to stay until there is a solution for the Syrian crisis.' Not, as Mazloun also pointed out, that the threat from ISIS is over, especially as the detention camps for ISIS prisoners present a growing problem for which the SDF receive only a fraction of the necessary international support.

Perhaps the most strident example of Turkey's special war is the holding back of vital water supplies from Syria, and from Iraq downstream. It has been shocking to see how even this has failed to make much media impact outwith the region, but this week the story was picked up by Agence France-Presse (AFP). Unlike in the press release on the drought now threatening Syria and Iraq that was produced by a collection of aid agencies – which only mentions high temperatures and low rainfall – AFP discusses the compounding impact of Turkey's reduction of the flow in the Euphrates to just 40% of the agreed minimum.

Turkey's forest clearance through felling and fire, as in the Iraqi mountains and in south-east Turkey/North Kurdistan, is about more than clearing guerrilla hideouts and building military roads. It is a deliberate destruction of

the environment and of the livelihoods it supported. Whether the fires begin as a side-effect of military bombardments or are more deliberately set, they are left to burn, and local people are prevented from trying to extinguish them. In Dersim (Tunceli) firefighters were finally allowed to go into action this week as a result of rising public anger after the mountains had been on fire for thirteen days. On Wednesday, Fırat News Agency, reporting on the systematic destruction of the forests of North Kurdistan, described instructions being broadcast from military helicopters to Village Guards, who work for the Turkish state, telling them not to leave a single tree standing.

The manoeuvres around last weekend's visit to Iraq by the French president demonstrate how intertwined and complex this politics of war is. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq was delighted to host Macron last Sunday after the Baghdad regional summit. As Fehim Taştekin explains in Duvar, France is keen to boost its own international power, prestige, and economic fortunes by stepping into the gap opened up by America's declining involvement in the region. And they can build on a history of French support for the Kurds, including for the no-fly-zone that enabled the establishment of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq in 1991. The Kurdish Regional Government is also keen for external support that can help prevent them being crushed between Turkish and Iranian competition for greater control.

In Iraq, Macron met with Nadia Murad, ISIS survivor and most prominent Yazidi campaigner. They had met before in France, but this time they were able to talk at the scene of ISIS' crimes. However, plans to go to Şengal (Sinjar) were abandoned as too dangerous in light of the Turkish attacks. Conveniently, Macron didn't get the chance to see how the Yazidis' self-governing authorities are trying to maintain some control over Yazidi lives in the face of decisions taken by others, including the US and the UN. Turkey must be congratulating themselves on forcing this change of plan too. Not having interacted with the people in Şengal no doubt made it easier for Macron to produce his purposefully opaque statement that 'the region is a victim of both the terrorist activity perpetrated by certain groups and bombing by the Turkish armed forces.' What terrorist activity? Which groups?

Macron's visit to Hewlêr (Erbil) included being presented to women Peshmerga fighters, who France lavished with praise that was rightly due to the Syrian Kurdish YPJ. Meghan Bodette comments 'The vast majority of Kurdish women fighters in the campaign against ISIS were YPJ and YJA-STAR [the women's military wing of the PKK]. Women have virtually no power, let alone senior command roles, in the [Kurdistan Regional Government] KRG's armed forces. Foreign countries should know better, even when local actors try to appropriate this struggle.' To make this misrepresentation worse, it was the Peshmerga who abandoned the Yazidis to ISIS before Yazidi survivors were rescued by the PKK and YPG/YPJ; and the KRG, which is close to Turkey, has been obstructive to the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, to whom the YPJ are attached.

Any hopes that the Iraqi government might make a stand against Turkey's incursions into Iraqi sovereignty look further away than ever this week as we learn that Iraq is negotiating a major arms purchase from Turkey, including armed drones and possibly also logistics and training. In a televised discussion on Monday, Iraq's defence minister called on the peshmerga to expel the PKK from their long-established bases in North Iraq, and he refused to condemn Turkey's intensive and far-reaching incursions, describing them as a 'justified breach' of Iraqi sovereignty. When pressed on this he slammed down the microphone, exclaiming 'don't provoke me'. Further questioning prompted him to start to leave the room.

President Erdogan's foreign adventures are accompanied by desperate strategies to stay in power at home, where polls show both himself and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) continuing to lose support. On Wednesday, his plans to lower the election threshold from 10% to 7% were agreed by the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the far-right party which his AKP government relies on for support. This move is clearly a response to the MHP, which has been polling below 10%, but will have other consequences too, as there will be perceived to be less of a need to use tactical votes to pull smaller parties over the threshold. Ozer Sencar of MetroPOLL told Al-Monitor, "Some strategic left-wing voters may shift from the HDP [Peoples' Democratic Party] to the CHP [Republican People's Party]," and that "votes that might have

switched from the AKP to the MHP so that it doesn't get caught up in the threshold will stay with the AKP." He also pointed out that changing election rules in a run up to an election can make a party look insecure, which is not a vote winner. Of course, the HDP could be banned altogether before the next election – though in a rare slither of good news their lawyers have been granted a further month to examine the huge collection of files that have been gathered against them.

And finally, back to Afghanistan, which continues to be a major focus of discussion and speculation. Fehim Taştekin, in Duvar, looks at how the Taliban are already coming to be seen as moderate extremists in comparison with ISIS, and he notes how, by attempting to present themselves as respectable interlockers for the international community, the Taliban could end up driving their most extreme supporters into the arms of ISIS. Generally, events in Afghanistan are driving fears that it will become an incubator for more brutal jihadi fighters and enable the growth of both ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Syrians for Truth and Justice report on the welcome given to the Taliban's victory by militant jihadi groups in Syria, especially the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) – formerly Jabhat al-Nusra – which controls most of Idlib, where celebrations took place on the streets and in the mosques. They note that victory statements were also issued by the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria and the Syrian Islamic Council (SIC), 'which consists of 40 Sharia associations and committees and defines itself as: "a Syrian moderate Sharia referential authority."' The boost that this has given to the morale of the Syrian Islamists is underlined by SIC's demand for "cleansing Syria from the filth of the Iranian and Russian occupations, as well as their operatives..."

The new world order seems a lot more friendly to militant Islamists than to Kurdish radical democracy.