

America: the dog that didn't bark in the night – a weekly news review

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On the night of 1 February, around sixty Turkish military aircraft targeted neighbourhoods in Iraq and Syria. They bombed Yazidi genocide survivors in Şengal (Sinjar), devastating villages and killing three civilians. They bombed Makhmour Refugee camp, home to a community, now numbering some 12,000, that originally came to Iraq to escape Turkey's persecution and destruction of Kurdish villages in the 1990s. Those bombs killed two camp guards and injured many others. They bombed in Dêrik (al-Malakiyah), across the border in Syria, where they targeted a power station providing vital infrastructure and killed four members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

And from the Turkish occupied areas, militias shelled Shebha (Shahba), where displaced people from Afrîn have found a temporary home.

That day, the people of North and East Syria had been saying a final farewell to family and comrades killed in the ISIS attack and attempted prison break-out in Hasaka. When the prison was finally declared safe, on 31 January, forty SDF and internal security forces fighters, 77 prison staff and guards, and four civilians were dead. In defeating that ISIS attack, the SDF received the support of the US-led Coalition, especially from the air. The SDF statement following the fighting observed that there was good cooperation between the SDF and the Coalition, with operations coordinated and conducted together, though they also repeated their urgent call for more military, political, and economic assistance.

I wrote last week that other countries have contracted out refugees to Turkey, and contracted out ISIS prisoners to the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria. In the war against ISIS, the international Coalition has also contracted out dying. The SDF have provided the foot-soldiers, and they have provided the martyrs, too – over 11,000 by the time of ISIS' territorial defeat. They should have been able to expect, in return, that their Autonomous Authority would be granted a level of international recognition, but this hasn't happened. They have not even been given a seat at the unproductive Geneva peace talks, unlike the Turkey-backed militias. At the very least, the people of North and East Syria should have been able to expect that their international allies, who have control of the air space, would protect them from bomb attacks. However, with the region facing direct attacks from Turkey, the silence of the United States and of the 'international community' has been deafening. This silence speaks volumes.

After the defeat of the ISIS attack in Hasaka, which looks to have been planned as the first part of a much bigger ISIS operation, the US State Department put out a press briefing commending the SDF and stressing the need for international support for the overall defeat of ISIS. It concluded, "The U.S. government will continue its stabilization and other programs in the region... The United States, through the Coalition, remains committed to the

enduring defeat of ISIS, working by, with, and through our local partners.” After the recent attacks by Turkey, they have said nothing.

The SDF statement put out after the Turkish attacks concluded, “It is pretty obvious that the attacks of the Turkish occupation state were not conducted without the knowledge of the international coalition forces.” This must be a hard thing to accept when you have just been fighting alongside those forces in order to protect the whole world from ISIS, and have had to bury so many of your comrades. We know that Turkey’s invasions of Afrîn in 2018 and of Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) and Girê Spî (Tell Abyad) in 2019 were carried out with US knowledge too, and that the 2019 invasion came after the US had pushed the SDF to withdraw their heavy weapons from the border. We also know that the US National Security Advisor had a wide-ranging phone call with the Chief Advisor to Turkey’s President Erdoğan on the day of the attack.

On Thursday morning, US soldiers carried out a long-planned predawn raid in northern Idlib on the home of the ISIS leader, Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who took over control of the organisation after the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The US official report states that, rather than allow himself to be captured, Al-Qurayshi blew himself up along with his family. In his announcement of Al-Qurayshi’s death, US President Biden described him as the “driving force” behind the Yazidi genocide in 2014, and responsible for the Hasaka attack. Biden also made three references to America’s “brave partners in the SDF”.

So, last week, US forces fought against ISIS alongside the SDF – the forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. And, this week, a US raid resulted in the death of the ISIS leader. But, in between times, North and East Syria and northern Iraq were attacked by Turkey, and the US did nothing – even though, every captured ISIS fighter gives more evidence of Turkey’s practical support for ISIS.

After the death of Al-Qurayshi, US State Department Spokesperson, Ned Price, tweeted “Terrorists will find no safe harbor on our watch.” But, as recently-captured ISIS men have confirmed, the Turkish occupied areas of Syria have become a safe harbour for ISIS. And, even apart from direct help to

ISIS, Turkey's constant attacks, aimed at destabilising the region, generate the insecurity on which ISIS thrives.

All this is proof, yet again, that the only thing that US allies can rely on is that you cannot rely on US support. Unless, of course, you have the second largest army in NATO and occupy a strategic position between Europe and Asia and between East and West, when, almost whatever you do, the US will stick with you.

The US has supported Turkey's military through all its aggressions against the Kurds, and backs Turkey's hard-line response to the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). However, the complications of Middle Eastern politics have found the US allied, in the battle against ISIS, with Syrian Kurds who Turkey refuses to distinguish from the PKK; and now their alliance with Turkey is fundamentally compromising America's ostensible reason for being in the region at all.

Referring to the Turkish bombardment of Ain Diwar [village] and Dêrik, which "has resulted in the martyrdom of civilians and fighters and also hit public infrastructure, including a water dam and power station." SDF Commander, Mazloun Abdi, commented via Twitter, "This attack amounts to a declaration of war, endangers civilians, and undermines our fight against ISIS. With the rising threat of terrorism, our Coalition partners bear a large part of the responsibility to prevent such Turkish attacks."

In fact, Turkey has never stopped attacking North and East Syria, despite the agreed ceasefires. They have also made repeated attacks on Şengal and Makhmour, and are currently undertaking a major assault in North Iraq, where they are continuing to build up their already extensive military occupation, and where they targeted PKK guerrillas with heavy bombing last weekend. Tuesday night's attacks were particularly hard and widespread. Many have described them as revenge for the defeat of ISIS in Hasaka. They are clearly intended to keep up pressure on the people of North and East Syria and ensure that they cannot enjoy even a bitter-sweet moment of victory.

This autumn, neither the US nor Russia was prepared to green light another Turkish invasion of Syria, but if Turkey is pushing the boundaries to see what

they can get away with, the silence that has greeted their latest attacks will resonate as encouragement.

And it is not just the US who doesn't want to know what is happening when it is Turkey who is the aggressor.

A browse through Twitter shows no mention of the attacks – or, indeed, the ISIS prison attack – from the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, nor from the foreign ministers of France or of the UK. We have learnt this week, though – thanks to a [report by Matt Broomfield](#) for Declassified UK – that the UK Government “quietly” resumed arms deals with Turkey last December, ending the suspension of new export licences for weapons that might be used for military operations in Syria, which was imposed at the time of Turkey's 2019 invasion.

There is also nothing on the Turkish attacks on the main United Nations Twitter account. (Perhaps we need an International Day Against Bombing People in order for them to take note.) [The statement put out by the UN in Iraq](#) provides a case study in diplomatic obfuscation. They wrote, “Following airstrikes in Ninewa with civilian casualties reported, we reiterate that Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected at all times. Local populations must be protected, disputes should be addressed through dialogue and cooperation.” Not only does this fail to say who carried out the airstrikes, but it refers to this aggression as a “dispute”, which suggests blame on both sides. The Yazidis have no dispute with Turkey, other than wanting Turkey to leave them in peace. It also refers simply to Ninewa, the governorate in which Şengal is situated, thus disguising the fact that the attacks specifically targeted the Yazidis; and it makes no mention of the attacks on Makhmour camp.

Tuesday night's attacks in Iraq targeted areas whose control is disputed between the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG simply parrots Turkey's narrative in which all Kurdish activists are regarded as PKK. Their Directorate General of Counter Terrorism noted on their [Facebook page](#) that Turkey had bombed 'PKK militants' in Şengal, and that there was “a fight between the Turkish army and

PKK soldiers” across the border in Dêrik. Government-linked Kurdistan 24 reported, quoting “security sources”, that “Turkish warplanes... struck suspected positions of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Iraq’s disputed areas of Makhmour and Sinjar, resulting in casualties and severe material damage”.

Kurdistan Region President, Nechirvan Barzani, was happy to be pictured visiting Erdoğan in the Presidential palace in Ankara the very next day, where they discussed “the latest regional developments” as well as economic ties.

The Prime minister of Iraq had met with the Turkish Ambassador just over a week earlier; and the Iraqi army has recently been putting pressure on both Makhmour camp and the autonomous Yazidi leadership in Şengal. Reuters observed that “Iraq’s military condemned what it called a Turkish infiltration into Iraqi air space as a violation of its sovereignty. Baghdad is widely viewed, however, to be giving Ankara free rein to attack the militants.” And that “Turkish officials privately say they believe Baghdad is firmly on their side in fighting the PKK.”

The Reuters report, which was used in stories by other news media, is largely based on Turkey’s press briefing. It did not seek comments from people on the ground or from the perspective of those being attacked. It thus presents the airstrikes as “part of a continuing Turkish campaign in Iraq and Syria against militants of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, both of which Turkey regards as a terrorist group.”

All of this is only too familiar to the Kurds and their friends, but it should give pause for thought to those who have pinned their hopes on the Global Coalition against Daesh, whose “more than eighty members”, mentioned in Biden’s speech above, include some surprising names – such as Turkey.

Turkish attacks are, of course, far from the only problem in Iraq. The serious human rights issues in the Kurdistan Region were highlighted again this week with the announcement by eighty prisoners, held without trial for one to three years, that they had started an indefinite hunger strike under the banner “freedom or death”. The prisoners include activists and journalists who have

been critical of the government or who joined the 2020 protests against the non-payment of public-sector salaries. They have described how they were tortured to make them “confess” to crimes against the state.

Meanwhile, in Turkey, there has been a wave of strikes and protests as people struggle with soaring living costs. These have had some successes, but also been met by dismissals and – at a car-parts factory in Kocaeli – by police detentions. Turkey’s doctors have called a nationwide strike for next Tuesday to protest impossible work pressures and pay that can be little more than the very low minimum wage.

Erdoğan has added another nail to the coffin of Turkish democracy with the appointment of a new Justice Minister who is a government loyalist and won’t be tempted to give occasional reminders to the Interior Minister about the rule of law, like the man he replaces. Two Kurdish news sites, Xwebûn and Yeni Yaşam, have joined the long list of websites blocked in Turkey. And a video of buskers in Istanbul being detained by police for playing Kurdish music has prompted protests against the denial of Kurdish culture, including by Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) MP, Meral Daniş Beştaş, who made a press statement in parliament, complete with a Kurdish song.

This is just a sample of the daily restrictions and crackdowns taking place in Turkey. Despite the manifest and brutal authoritarianism and the politicised legal system, Germany has just attempted to deport a Kurdish Asylum Seeker who has been sentenced by Turkey to 8 ½ years in prison. Heybet Şener was convicted of “making propaganda for a terrorist organisation” for taking part in the 2014 protests against the ISIS siege of Kobanê and against the Turkish government’s refusal to help the defence against ISIS or to let volunteers cross the border. He was detained on Wednesday by the Bavarian State authorities and taken for deportation to Munich airport, where he started a hunger strike. His deportation was scheduled for Thursday, but public protests, including by MPs, managed to get him release, and his Asylum application will be looked at again.

While news from the Middle East proceeds rapidly from one drama to another, the workings of the European Court of Human Rights move to a very different tempo. But this week I can end with two positive legal developments.

On Tuesday, the Court issued a judgement on the case of forty HDP MPs who had their political immunity from prosecution lifted following a constitutional amendment made on 20 May 2016 that allowed this to be done en bloc without considering individual cases. The Court ruled that the lifting of their immunities infringed their right of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. The implications of this ruling should lead to the release of all the imprisoned HDP MPs, but we know that the Turkish government will ignore it.

For Council of Europe members, such as Turkey, the Court's rulings are legally binding, but enforcement is difficult. In the case of Osman Kavala, the businessman-philanthropist who the court demanded should be instantly released back in December 2019, the Council has now taken the next step towards disciplinary action that could see Turkey facing suspension or expulsion for refusing to comply. The Court must now review the case.

These processes have important impacts for Turkey's international relations, but, as we have seen, those who pull the strings of geopolitics are prepared to overlook a lot. It will take more than lawyers to force fundamental change. It will need mass action that cannot be ignored by politicians.

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