

Rojava roundup and the return of Gezi Park – a weekly news review

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The large scale operation against ISIS is continuing on the second day along the Iraqi border and Deir al-Zour desert. So far YPG and YPJ Anti-Terror units and SDF CT forces arrested more than a dozen terrorists and confiscated ammunition belonging to the cells.



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There is a lot to discuss in Syria, but with Turkey's student protests grabbing international headlines, we begin in Istanbul.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has told his followers that Turkey “won’t see another Gezi incident”. He is referring to the mass protests that grew out of the resistance to development in Istanbul’s Gezi Park in 2013. But in responding to protesting students the only way he knows how – with a brutal crackdown – he risks creating just what he claims to be avoiding.

It may seem strange that, out of the many attacks on freedom and democracy that have come to characterise Erdoğan's rule, the trigger for the protests that are now spreading from Istanbul to other cities was the appointment of a university rector. It may have seemed equally unlikely, in 2013, that a camp set up by environmentalists to protect an Istanbul park would start a movement that brought hundreds of thousands into the streets right across the country. But, when underlying problems run deep, a protest against a single issue can act as a catalyst triggering much wider involvement. Resistance against endless attacks on political and civic freedoms gets taken for granted, but new campaigns can spark an upsurge of activity. Both now and at Gezi, anger at the brutality of the government crackdown has been a major spur for future protest.

The immediate cause of the current actions was Erdogan's imposition of his choice of rector to head Istanbul's prestigious Boğaziçi University. Instead of the academics electing one of their own scholars, the university has been put under the leadership of one of Erdogan's political associates. From the first day of protest against this assault on Turkey's already battered academic freedoms, student protestors came under attack by the forces of law and order, equipped with an arsenal of tear gas, plastic bullets, house arrests and strip searches.

A month on, the university is surrounded by armoured vehicles, water cannons, and riot police. Hundreds of students have been detained, protests have spread to other cities, and local people have shown their support by banging pots and pans on their balconies. While Erdoğan's AKP predictably links the protestors to terrorists, using extreme rhetoric that is only outdone by the apoplectic utterances of their far-right alliance partner, the mainstream opposition CHP has not been afraid to align themselves with the students. Even the UN has expressed concern. But Erdoğan shows no appetite for compromise.

These protests are not, of course, primarily a Kurdish issue – which is another reason why they are able to strike such a strong popular chord, including with the CHP – but the students not only positioned their protest as part of a wider resistance to government authoritarianism, they also specifically referenced

the attacks on the HDP's predominantly Kurdish mayors. They have called the imposed rector a "trustee rector", making a comparison with the government-appointed "trustees" imposed in place of these democratically elected politicians. And if it continues to grow, this protest movement could affect the future of everyone in Turkey and of all those impacted by Turkish government policy.

Turkish-occupied Syria

Developments across the border in Syria are more easily disregarded as just continuations of earlier stories. However, all is far from restful.

The appalling human rights abuses in Turkish-occupied Afrîn were the subject of a conference held in Qamishli last Saturday. The final statement demanded that the United Nations treat the forced displacement and demographic change as a war crime and bring the perpetrators before the International Criminal Court. Some 300,000 people fled the area in 2018 to escape the horror of life under Turkey's mercenary gangs, which have shown no mercy to anyone who doesn't think like them, especially Kurds and non-Muslims. In their place, Turkey has brought in families of Islamist mercenaries – an estimated 400,000 new people who are living in homes belonging to the refugees or purloined from those who remained.

A similar, very deliberate, population change is taking place in Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) and Girê Spî (Tell Abyad), captured by Turkey in 2019. Again, thousands of people were forced to leave, and their homes have been commandeered for mercenary families.

Many of those who left attempted to settle in other towns, but a lack of work and rising rents are forcing them to seek refuge in IDP camps.

The Newroz camp near Derik has recently doubled its population from 500 to 1110 people, and is short of basic supplies such as mattresses, blankets, and cleaning materials.

Erdoğan had preannounced his intention to clear the original population and use the area to resettle refugees from other parts of Syria who had escaped to

Turkey. Last week, the North Press Agency reported on plans to settle Uyghur refugees in Serê Kaniyê too. Uyghurs have Turkic ethnicity, and it is estimated that around 50,000 have come to Turkey. Many Uyghur families whose men fought as Turkey's mercenaries have already moved there.

The North Press Agency has compiled a tally of atrocities committed by the occupying forces in Serê Kaniyê in January. It includes bombings, murders, arrests, and looting, as well as deadly infighting between armed occupying groups. Three of the local people arrested have been taken to prisons in Turkey.

This transfer of prisoners by an occupying power is forbidden by the Geneva Convention, but appears to have become a common practice in Turkey's occupation. Last week, Human Rights Watch released a report on 63 Syrian nationals who had been transferred to Turkey from Serê Kaniyê in October 2019.

A mixture of Kurds and Arabs, the men have all been accused (almost entirely without evidence) of links with the YPG, which Turkey equates with the PKK. One family had managed to raise a ransom to secure their relation's release, but most couldn't afford this. Five of the men have already been sentenced to life without parole. Human Rights Watch estimates there may be almost 200 prisoners who have been illegally transferred.

The Autonomous Administration

Despite Turkey's attacks, a large part of Syria is still under the control of the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria (AANES). But the AANES is under pressure from all the different forces seeking to boost themselves at the expense of Syria's future: Turkey and its mercenary gangs, the Assad regime, Russia, Iran, ISIS – even the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan, who support a very different sort of Kurdish politics, and the United States, which has little time for the AANES's radical political vision. While these different actors may benefit from the fact that others are also putting the AANES under pressure, how much they co-ordinate their opportunistic exploitation of the situation is a matter of speculation.

Turkey continues to direct artillery at Ain Issa (while Russia looks on) and to direct threats of future attacks at Derik. Ain Issa commands vital access to Kobane, and Turkey now has ten military bases in the area. Turkish targets include basic infrastructure. Last month, they again cut off the water supply to Hasakah for ten days, and their damage to the Ain Issa wheat silos threatens to disrupt the local flour supply.

Tensions with the regime died down somewhat last week, but only after a worrying escalation. Assad would dearly love to see the end of AANES, and their dangerous ideas of democracy and autonomy, and to take the area back under his control. Besides putting out negative propaganda and attempting to encourage inter-ethnic discord, the regime had been enforcing a two-month long blockade on the autonomous, predominantly-Kurdish neighbourhoods of Aleppo and on the Shabha region where most of the refugees from Afrîn have taken shelter. The blockade had severely restricted entry of basic supplies, including food and fuel. In response to this, and to arrests by the regime of relatives of members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and of their internal security forces, or *asayiş*, AANES imposed their own blockade, preventing cars entering the small, regime-controlled areas in Hasakah and Qamishli. A pro-regime protest in Hasakah descended into a gun battle where a protestor was killed, and this was followed by a regime attack on an *asayiş* station. But last week, talks were able to diffuse the situation. The blockades have been lifted, and the people of Shabha will be able to receive some desperately needed supplies.

There were fewer ISIS attacks in 2020 than 2019, but recent weeks have seen an upsurge. Attacks can also become a focus for discontent against the AANES, and ISIS' new pattern of attacking local leaders who work with the administration is calculated to feed this discontent. The fact that the AANES also has to ward off attacks from other quarters, clearly affects their ability to concentrate on chasing up ISIS sleeper cells, especially since there is an overlap in personnel and political agendas between ISIS and the Turkish mercenaries.

This last week saw a reactivation of Kurdish "unity" talks between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) – whose philosophy underpins the

Autonomous Administration's bottom-up democratic structures and its emphasis on women's rights and multiculturalism – and the Kurdish National Congress (KNC). The KNC has ties with the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan and has opposed many AANES structural and social changes. Saleh Muslim, member of the joint presidency of the PYD, told Rojava TV that the key to unity is a shared recognition that “the Turkish authority is the enemy of the Kurdish people until it changes its position on the Kurds”. But the KNC has often been accused of siding with Turkey, and their primary target, which they share with the US who are facilitating the talks, is the breaking of all links with the PKK, which is also under attack from the KDP. The long and short of all those initials, is that conservative forces within and without Syria are exploiting tactical pressures both to attack the radicalism of the Autonomous Administration and to pursue an attack on the PKK. This week, the KDP-dominated Kurdistan Regional Government again closed the crossing into North East Syria to media organisations, which hardly suggests trust and cooperation.

A further drain on the AANES's limited resources comes from the large number of ISIS prisoners and families that they are expected to look after. Controlling al-Hol, the biggest camp, is increasingly difficult as ISIS women use fear and the most severe punishments to impose their cruel rule on other inmates. Twenty people were murdered in the camp last month, and there have been coordinated escape attempts. Since November, the AANES has been releasing Syrian nationals not accused of serious crimes or links with ISIS, but, for the rest, there has been little international help: no attempt to set up the international court that the AANES has requested, and only very limited repatriation of foreign nationals. The United Nations has just put out a plea urging countries to take their children. There are 27,000 children in the camp with 60 different nationalities. They not only suffer a painful childhood, but risk radicalisation as “cubs of the caliphate”.

The politics of North East Syria are complicated, but the underlying struggle for freedom and a better future is a simple one. And it couldn't be more clearly illustrated than by the two young Arab women murdered by ISIS in January, whose histories have just been published by the Jinha News Agency. Hind al-

Khedr was married off aged just 15, and deserted, pregnant, by her husband a few months later. Sada al-Harmoush's husband divorced her for giving birth to two daughters. Both women faced huge resistance from their families to their wish to work with the Autonomous Administration to promote women's freedom and rights, but on 1 November, Saada began work as co-chair of their local council and Hind started as her deputy, with responsibility for the economy committee. Hind's friends recall that she was inspired by the murdered politician Hevrîn Xelef, and even though they soon received death threats themselves from ISIS, the two women would not give up their goal.

The spirit of selfless resistance is thriving on both sides of the Turkish/Syrian border.