

# Turkish forces in Syria and Syrian refugees in Turkey – a weekly news review

Sarah Glynn examines the context of the attacks on Syrian refugees in Turkey and of the unrest in Turkish-occupied Syria, and catches up with new developments in Turkey's ongoing invasion of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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As Syrian refugees face pogroms in Turkish cities, and Turkish occupation forces meet with protests in occupied Syria, Turkey's role in Syria is once again under the spotlight. Turkish intervention in Syria's civil war has been opportunistic and brutal, and its legacy will continue to poison the possibilities for peaceful life in the country for many decades to come. This week I will put current tensions into the context of the recent

history of Turkish/Syrian politics, and I will also catch up with developments in Turkey's ongoing invasion of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

### **Turkey's Syrian adventure**

When Syria's "Arab Spring" descended into civil war, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was then Prime Minister of Turkey, saw an opportunity to increase Turkish power and influence in a region that had once been part of the Ottoman Empire. Initially alongside the United States, Turkey supported the Sunni rebels fighting Bashar al-Assad's Syrian Government forces, and Turkish intelligence brought these groups together under the title of the Free Syrian Army, later the Syrian National Army (SNA). Following Russian intervention, when the tide turned in Assad's favour, the SNA militias maintained a role in Syria as Turkey's mercenaries. They formed ground troops for Turkey's invasions – of Jarabulus in 2016-17, Afrîn in 2018, and Serêkaniyê and Girê Spî in 2019 – and they have been given day to day control of the occupied areas, with appalling consequences for those who live there. While many people, especially Kurds, escaped these areas in the face of Turkish oppression, Turkey has brought in new settlers, including returned refugees, in a deliberate policy of demographic change.

Turkey has also provided support for the group now known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which is descended from Al-Qaeda and now controls Idlib in Syria's northwest. As Assad regained control of rebel-held areas, opposition supporters were bussed out, and Idlib is where many have ended up.

Turkey was the conduit for the foreign fighters who came to join ISIS, ISIS fighters recuperated in Turkish hospitals, and there are well-founded [allegations](#) that Turkey – and specifically Erdoğan's son in law – smuggled oil out of Syria on behalf of ISIS, so providing the organisation with vital funding. A newly published video by Lindsay Snell includes interviews with ISIS prisoners [discussing](#) Turkey's role.

### **Syrian refugees in Turkey**

Syria's civil war has generated millions of refugees, and Turkey, which also bears responsibility for helping to make life in Syria unliveable, is where many have fled to. Since 2016, the European Union has effectively paid Turkey to be their border police and prevent any more refugees from travelling on to Europe. A border wall now prevents more people from leaving Syria, but there are well over three million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. With economic stress and fierce competition for jobs, and with a population steeped in ethnic nationalism, anti-refugee feelings are rife. Politicians from all parties – except for the HDP (now the DEM Party) and others on the left – fuel anti-refugee sentiment as they attempt to blame them for the country's woes and compete to show how quickly they would return them to Syria.

Erdoğan has claimed the refugees are proof of Turkish generosity, but he also makes plans for their removal. Resettlement of the refugees is used as an excuse for demanding control over Syrian land and as a mechanism for demographic change, and refugees are used as bargaining chips in negotiations with Europe – with threats to open

the gates and let them into the EU. In defiance of international law, Turkey has been carrying out forced repatriations at increasing rates. 16,500 Syrians were [deported](#) under so-called “voluntary return” last month.

Refugee returns were a jarring component of the Republican People’s Party’s election campaign last year, which was otherwise presented as very positive – though the secret deal made with the leader of the anti-immigrant Victory Party before the second round of the presidential vote demonstrated the ruthless core hidden behind the heart symbols.

## **Riot and protest**

Hatred of Syrian refugees has become a tinder box that is easily ignited. This week, the spark was provided by accusations that a Syrian man had sexually abused a young girl in the central Anatolian city of Kayseri. On Sunday night, protests turned into a rampage as Turks attacked Syrian homes, businesses, and cars. Police [attempted](#) to reassure rioters by explaining that the victim was “not Turkish”, but by then the fire had been lit.

As I discussed last week, there have been renewed moves to restore relations between Turkey and Syria. Erdoğan [told](#) reporters after Friday prayers, a week ago, “Just as we kept our ties very lively in the past – we even held talks between our families with Mr Assad – it is certainly not possible (to say) this will not happen again in the future, it can happen”. Agreement will not be easy, as Assad wants a guaranteed withdrawal of Turkish troops from Syrian land, and respect for Syrian sovereignty, which Turkey is not prepared to give; however, the ongoing discussion, and Turkey’s backing for relations in principle, has made supporters of the Syrian opposition worried and angry with what they see as Turkish betrayal. They also hold Turkey responsible for the appalling administration of the occupied areas and their economic difficulties.

Already last week, the opening of a border gate between government-held and Turkish occupied areas had been met with resistance. The news from Kayseri served to pour oil on the flames. On Monday, protestors in occupied Syria attacked Turkish military bases and checkpoints, burnt Turkish trucks, and destroyed Turkish flags. While some SNA men [took part](#) in the protests, most SNA and HTS leaders, who are dependent on Turkey, came to Turkey’s defence. (A source [told](#) North Press Agency that SNA leaders were threatened with severe consequences for the region if they didn’t give Turkey support.) Protestors were met with live ammunition, and the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that seven protestors were killed and more than twenty wounded. Five of the dead – killed by Turkish forces – were former opposition fighters [displaced](#) from Ghoutah to Afrîn in the 2018 deal that gave Russia control of Ghoutah and left Turkey free to invade Afrîn. There are also reports of other casualties. HTS [mobilised](#) 250 militants to protect the Bab al-Hawa crossing and Turkish military bases.

The images coming out of Syria fuelled further attacks on Syrians in Turkey on Monday, with the violence [spreading](#) to other cities, including Istanbul. Rioters proclaimed,

“How happy is the one who says I am a Turk.” In Antalya, a 15-year-old Syrian boy was [fatally stabbed](#).

A massive data leak, just this week, of the personal information of Syrian refugees has led to further concerns about their safety, and also to [speculation](#) over deliberate orchestration, perhaps as part of a conflict between the government’s partners in the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the government.

On Tuesday, with 447 rioters detained in Turkey, Erdoğan temporarily [closed](#) the border crossings in Syria, and threatened to punish those who had defiled the Turkish flag. He has attempted to calm the situation both sides of the border by squaring the circle – claiming, in a televised speech, that he would improve relations with Assad without breaking the trust of the rebels. He has stated that there will be no Turkish withdrawal in the near future, quoting the “threat” posed by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which he referred to as the “terrorist organisation”.

Relations between Turkey and Syria were on the agenda when Erdoğan met Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of Wednesday’s summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, but this situation won’t be easily resolved.

### **Kurdish response**

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – which Erdoğan would like the Syrian government to help him crush – has put out a statement emphasising that any agreement with the Turkish state will be against Syrian interests and Syrian unity. They call, instead, for [unity](#) through local self-administration, and a coming together of all Syrian national forces to liberate the occupied land.

In Turkey, DEM Party Co-chair Tülay Hatimoğulları called for a [peace dialogue](#) that brings together Turkey and Assad but also the Kurdish People of Syria – meaning the Autonomous Administration.

### **Also in Syria**

Before leaving Syria – a further reminder that Turkey’s attacks never stop. Turkey was [responsible](#) for 31 attacks on Syrian villages in June, which killed at least two people. Turkey’s restrictions on water flowing into Syria have [caused](#) the Zirgan River, a tributary of the Khabur, to dry up almost completely. And ISIS sleeper cells are able to thrive in the situation of perpetual insecurity generated by Turkish attacks, and in the safe havens furnished by the occupied regions. The SDF have announced that in the first half of 2024, in operations against ISIS, they [arrested](#) “233 terrorists, suspects, and collaborators” and killed ten others.

Also, a reminder that, despite all the hostility, life goes on. Tuesday saw the [opening](#) of the Raqqa book fair, where all the books have been produced in the city.

## In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

While Erdoğan talks about negotiations with Assad, he shows no intention at all of talking about a peace agreement with the PKK, despite longstanding PKK demands for negotiation. Instead, he talks about eliminating the organisation completely, and uses Turkey's fight against the PKK as an excuse for taking control of and occupying a large portion of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

This week, Turkish attacks on the Kurdistan Region have [intensified further](#). The PKK reports massive bombardments, and the illegal use of gas to try and kill the guerrillas in their tunnels. More armoured vehicles have arrived, and villages have been evacuated under threat of bombardment. Turkish bombardment has set the hills on fire, [destroying](#) at least 10,000 trees, and has [targeted](#) the Assyrian village of Mîsra and its church. The Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella group that includes the PKK, [claims](#) that Turkey is bringing in radical jihadi mercenaries to fight for them in Iraq.

The Kurdistan National Congress in Brussels (KNK) sees Turkey's actions as "a clear attempt to occupy Iraqi Kurdistan". They [warn](#) of Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions in the region, noting calls by Erdoğan's coalition partner, MHP leader, Devlet Bahçeli, for annexation of Kirkuk and Mosul, where Turkey is stirring tensions and arming Turkmen factions.

While the Kurdistan Region's dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), looks to the short-term self-interest of its leading family, and works with the Turkish invaders, the region's other main party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), [condemns](#) Turkey's illegal violation of Kurdistan and Iraqi sovereignty, and the silence of the Iraqi and Kurdistan Region governments.

Both the KCK and the PUK have denounced a nonsensical accusation by the Iraqi Interior Minister and the KDP that a group affiliated to the PKK, and including members of the PUK, was responsible for recent fires. The KCK [writes](#), "The allegations that we burned the bazaars and markets of the people of Kirkuk, Erbil, and Duhok, which we did our best to protect against ISIS attacks and gave martyrs in the process of doing so, is slander and manipulation. We entrust the Kurdish and Iraqi people who watched our forces fight to protect them, to decide whether these allegations are true or not." Responsibility for the fires has been claimed by Turkish ultra-nationalists, and the KCK [believe](#) that behind all of this is the hand of Turkish intelligence.

The United States is happy for Turkey to kill members of the PKK, and makes ineffectual statements [reporting](#) that "We have urged our partners in the government of Turkey to coordinate with both Iraqi and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq authorities on any cross-border military operations to protect civilians from harm;" and that they have urged Turkey to respect Iraqi sovereignty.

## Turkey

Returning to Turkey itself, an [account](#) of a vicious racist attack against Kurdish workers in Muğla provides a reminder that anti-Syrian attacks and anti-Kurdish attacks come out of the same racist culture. Residents in 14 areas in Şırnak remain under [severe restrictions](#) as these areas continue to be declared Temporary Special Security Zones for military operations against the PKK, as they have been every two weeks since last year. Turkey keeps up their reputation as a difficult place to be a journalist, [sentencing](#) a group of Kurdish journalists to prison terms of over six years. And protests [continue](#) against the removal of the elected co-mayor of Hakkâri, and his replacement with a trustee. These include a “March to respect the will of the people” that has gone through different cities across the country.

In contrast to state oppression, local shepherds have been [collecting](#) donated sheep – and also animal feed – to help villagers who lost everything in the fire between Diyarbakir and Mardin to rebuild their flocks and stay in their villages.

## Europe

Here in Europe, Turkey’s football match against Austria in the European Championships produced a diplomatic incident when Merih Demiral celebrated scoring his second goal by making the hand signals of the violent ultranationalist Grey Wolves. This is seen as similar to making a Nazi salute, and, after widespread outcry, Demiral has been given a two-match suspension. The Grey Wolves are believed to be the largest far right group in Germany, where they were [deliberately encouraged](#) by the state in the 1970s as a counter to left wing activists. Although the Grey Wolves are not banned in Germany, the incident was condemned by the Interior Minister, who [tweeted](#) “Using the European Football Championship as a platform for racism is completely unacceptable”. This prompted Turkey to [summon](#) the German ambassador, claiming this reaction was xenophobic, and Germany to summon the Turkish Ambassador in return. There have been [calls](#) for Turkish supporters to make the symbol at tonight’s quarter final in Berlin, where Turkey will play against the Netherlands, and Erdoğan has [cancelled](#) his attendance at the Informal Summit of the Heads of State of the Organisation of Turkic States in order to attend the match.

## Iran

Yesterday saw the [run-off vote](#) in the Iranian presidential elections. In a system dominated by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, the president has little power, though he may influence the choice of Khamenei’s successor. One candidate, Masoud Pezeshkian, is described as more moderate, and the other hardline, but both are approved by the system and Pezeshkian will not challenge Khamenei.

There has been a widespread call for a boycott to protest the lack of real democracy and deprive the authorities of their fig leaf of legitimacy. The official figure for the turn-out in the first round was 40%, but there are claims that it was actually much lower, and there are no independent statistics. The prospect of even a very limited moderation

seems to have persuaded more people to vote in the run-off, which Pezeshkian has won with an official turnout, again disputed, of 50%. Time will tell if this new president can make a difference.

In their desperation to get votes, both candidates tried to appeal to the long-persecuted Kurdish minority by emphasising their Kurdish links. Saeed Jalili even put on Kurdish clothes to emphasise his Kurdish heritage, while Pezeshkian, who grew up in Mahabad where his father was stationed with the army, [finished](#) his speech with a few sentences in fluent Kurdish, and long live Kurdistan! One day such actions may be more than political theatre, but that day seems a long way off.

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