

Musical myths and cruel reality – a news review

A new Kurdish music video in the tradition of national mythmaking provides both a Kurdish myth and a universal story of the fight against patriarchy. In contrast to its optimism, this news review examines the failure of the CPT to visit Öcalan; Turkish attacks on North and East Syria and the situation in areas under Turkish occupation, including the lack of international response; continued ISIS attacks and arrests; Turkey's diplomatic and military campaign in Iraq; the election in Iran; and judicial turmoil in Turkey.

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Sarah Glynn

Like other followers of the Kurdish Freedom Movement, I have been watching and listening to the new video put out by the Hunergeha Welat studio in Qamishli for this week's International Women's Day. [Stranên Kezîya Sor](#): Jin Jiyan Azadî is a twenty-minute musical allegory of Abdullah Öcalan's women's science, which he calls jineology.

It begins in an idealised prehistory, where women live in harmony with nature. This is brutally interrupted by patriarchy – in the form of violent, black-hooded men and of the state (denoted by a police riot shield) – before the women's movement throws off symbolic burkas to create a new harmony built on women's strength and femininity. (Much of the filming was done in Raqqa, former capital of the so-called Islamic State. Kezîya Sor, meaning red braid, references Sakine Cansiz and her hennaed hair.) Disappointingly, there is no attempt to show the simultaneous emergence of a new man, though this is a vital part of Öcalan's philosophy, as well as of a sustainable society. Disappointingly, too, although almost all the performers are women, the director, composer, and lyricists are all men. Perhaps they are the feminist men missing from the on-screen action, but the video's message is diluted without women in these key roles.

Music videos often enjoy accentuating their Kurdishness. This one is very much in the tradition of national mythmaking. Looking at the national myth-making process in her native Estonia, Epp Annus [wrote](#), "Nationally-oriented intellectuals strove to idealize past times in order to create the possibility of a national future based on the ideal past. Their joint intellectual efforts established the mythical space of a nation, a lost period of perfection in the past." Annus argues that "the explanatory power of the myth, destined originally for the entire world, was transferred to a nation instead".

In the Kurdish case, the myth references both the Kurdish nation (not nation-state), and also the universal story of the rise of patriarchy and the need to overcome it. Jineology is pertinent to every nation and place – and the video coincides with the internationally-celebrated Women's Day – but how these ideas are played out in each place will be different. The particular and the

universal is also reflected in the music, which moves from more operatic or filmic to more traditionally Kurdish.

A similar mythic approach and semi-operatic style was [also used](#) in Awazê Çiya's much longer "Epic of the PKK" from November 2022, which also begins in prehistory, and was also produced in co-operation with the cultural movement in Rojava.

Öcalan and the CPT

Sadly, reality is not so uplifting. Three weeks ago, on 15 February, Öcalan himself passed the 25th anniversary of his incarceration in İmralı island prison. Concern and fear over the situation of the man recognised by millions of Kurds as their leader – who will turn 75 next month – has been intensified by his total isolation from the outside world. For 35 months he has not been allowed any communication with anyone outside the prison, apart from a delegation from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT). They visited the prison a year and a half ago, and have given no information about what they found.

The CPT are uniquely able to get access to prisoners in all [Council of Europe](#) member states. The agreement that makes this possible, stipulates that their reports on their visits must allow a response from the country concerned, and that it is up to that country whether to make the report public. However, Öcalan's lawyers have argued that in these extreme circumstances the CPT have both a right and a duty to make a brief statement on his health and situation. Article 10 (2) of the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, stipulates that if a State Party "fails to co-operate or refuses to improve the situation in the light of the Committee's recommendations, the Committee may decide, after the Party has had an opportunity to make known its views, by a majority of two-thirds of its members to make a public statement on the matter." The CPT has made such statements on Turkey in the past – in 1992 and 1996 – and were going to do so with respect to İmralı in 2008, but were pre-empted by Turkey's announcement that they would construct a new detention block on

the island and bring in other prisoners. The three other prisoners there now are facing similar isolation.

Kurdish frustration at the [CPT](#)'s silence has been building, but it still came as a bitter blow when it was learnt that a CPT delegation had been in Turkey on 15 February and had not visited İmralı. The CPT's announcement notes that the delegation "raised with the relevant authorities certain issues related to the situation of the prisoners currently held at İmralı F-type High-Security Prison, in particular as regards their contact with the outside world"; but they did not see the situation for themselves, nor allow Öcalan to make contact, if only briefly.

[Asrin Law office](#), which represents Öcalan, put out a statement that notes, "This approach of the CPT is neither compatible with the prohibition of torture nor with their duty to prevent torture conditions." And they point out that, "The CPT also knows that for a year and a half Turkey has not fulfilled the injunction of the United Nations Human Rights Committee that 'he should be allowed to see his lawyers immediately'." The Group Deputy Chair of the pro-Kurdish, leftist DEM Party, Sezai Temelli, [observed](#) that by ignoring İmralı, which is central to all the problems in Turkish prisons, the CPT has put their own legitimacy into question. While the European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress (KCDK-E) [believes](#) that the CPT has "taken a political stance". The campaign for Öcalan's freedom has acquired an additional urgency.

On Sunday 25 February, thousands of people gathered in Istanbul for a Freedom and Democracy rally [called](#) by the DEM Party, and two days later, hundreds of Kurdish women [undertook](#) a noisy and colourful march through Strasbourg to the Council of Europe building.

North and East Syria

In North and East Syria, where the Autonomous Administration has been attempting to put Öcalan's ideas into practice, empowering women and inspiring activists across the globe, there is no shortage of actors wanting to

reverse every success. The Administration's chief enemy is Turkey, but both President Assad's Syrian Government and Iran want to see the Administration brought to their knees and forced to abandon their autonomy. Turkish air attacks in December and January deliberately targeted vital infrastructure and have left the region struggling. Repairs to the region's power stations are prohibitively expensive and require parts that are unavailable. This is an oil producing area, but attacks on oil wells have [turned](#) it into a place where people are forced to join long queues to get fuel. Since Turkey's destruction of the only gas-bottling plant, people have been [forced](#) to cook on dangerous and dirty kerosene stoves.

Turkey has never stopped their bombing and their aerial assassinations – both random strikes to drive away local people and [targeted killings](#) of people in the civil administration or in the security services. On 28 February, a civilian was killed in an attack on a poultry farm, and Turkish drones killed three members of Sutoro – a Syriac and Assyrian police force that is part of the region's internal security forces (Asayish). The latter was a double tap attack. Turkey first [targeted](#) two cars, and when Sutoro responded, they became the target of a second attack, along with a car carrying the wounded.

Under Turkish occupation

In the parts of Syria that Turkey has invaded and [occupied](#), the situation is much much worse. This has already been the subject of gruesome human rights reports by the United Nations and others, but a new report by Human Rights Watch demonstrates that the many abuses continue regardless. The situation is summed up in the title – itself a quote from one of their interviewees: “‘Everything is by the Power of the Weapon’: Abuses and Impunity in Turkish-Occupied Northern Syria”.

In its own words: “This report documents abductions, arbitrary arrests, unlawful detentions, including of children, sexual violence, and torture by the various factions of the SNA [the Turkish controlled and funded militias that make up the so-called Syria National Army], the Military Police, a force established to curb such abuses, and members of the Turkish Armed Forces

and Turkish intelligence agencies... It also documents violations of housing, land, and property rights, including widespread looting and pillaging as well as property seizures and extortion, and exposes the abject failure of most of the accountability measures introduced in recent years to curb abuses or to provide restitution to victims.”

There are no surprises here, but this is an area that has been increasingly forgotten, and these are inconvenient truths that no one wants to listen to. Turkish-occupied Syria has been ill-served by the mainstream media. Reading the recent debunking of the hugely influential New York Times Hamas rape story – a story that lacked any independent evidence and was researched by a hard-line Zionist who is believed to have worked with Israeli military intelligence – I couldn’t share the shock that a supposedly reputable paper would act in this way. I can remember, from three years ago, their glowing portrayal of Turkish-[occupied Afrin](#) after their Istanbul reporter, Carlotta Gal, had visited with a Turkish escort.

As the occupying power, Turkey is responsible for every breach of humanitarian law and every potential war crime, but almost nothing is being done to hold anyone to account at any level, let alone at the top.

International inaction

Turkey did not respond to requests for [comments](#) from Human Rights Watch and is extremely unlikely to respond to their requests for action. (They don’t even act on rulings from the European Court of Human Rights.) The authors’ demands from Europe and other UN member states are very limited, though even these are unlikely to be acted on. They want UN states to prosecute those involved in international crimes, and they want the EU to discourage Turkey from continuing to deport Syrian refugees into these dangerous occupied areas. (A further 18,000 were forcibly [deported](#) in February, making 625,000 returnees – many of them unwilling – to date.)

If they actually wanted to end these and other abuses, international powers could do much more. For a start, they could stop selling arms to Turkey. Instead, the United States has agreed the sale of F16 fighter jets in exchange

for Turkey lifting their veto on Sweden joining NATO, and Turkey has been [admitted](#) into the German-led European Sky Shield Initiative, which aims to set up an integrated European missile defence system. If they really wanted to move the situation towards a peaceful resolution, they could take the PKK off the American and European terrorist lists and support Öcalan's repeated calls for peace talks. And they could insist on including representatives from the Autonomous Administration in any talks on the future of Syria – although these are currently stalled.

We can't know what the United States will [put](#) on the table when Turkey's intelligence chief visits Washington this week, but it is not likely to be any of this. President Erdoğan is still demanding that America end their tactical alliance with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which he portrays as indistinguishable from the PKK, and that the SDF withdraw 30 km from the border, abandoning the protection of most of the region's centres of population and its most fertile land.

ISIS

People in Syria and Iraq still face a threat from ISIS cells – and [Turkey's attacks](#) and deliberate destabilisation serves ISIS as a recruiting sergeant. Late on Monday 26 February, ISIS threw a hand grenade into the Syrian Democratic Council centre in Qamishli, injuring one person and causing material damage. They are [thought](#), too, to have been behind the murder of four guards working at different Administration-linked facilities; and they have [killed](#) Syrian Government and Iraqi soldiers.

The SDF [arrested](#) ten ISIS militants in Deir ez-Zor last Friday, and they are interrogating sixteen ISIS "operatives and facilitators" who they [captured](#) in Heseke on 22 February. On Monday, the Internal Security Forces (Asayish) in Heseke [announced](#) that they had captured 47 people, including thirteen ISIS militants, three individuals linked to Turkish backed militias, and thirteen involved in "sabotage groups".

In Iraq

Meanwhile in Iraq, Turkey continues to combine diplomatic meetings with physical violence. Erdoğan wants to persuade the Iraqi Government and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) to side with him against the PKK, as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has done. However, Iraq's foreign minister – Fuad Hussein – whilst regarding the PKK as a “problem”, does not classify it as a “terrorist organisation”. He has [observed](#) that the PKK encompasses many different organisations.

Bafel Talabani, leader of the PUK, has stated, “The PKK is not our enemy, and we have relations with them. Our enmity cannot extend to any Kurdish party within the Kurdistan Region's territories.” He [emphasised](#) that, despite tensions between the Kurdistan region and the federal government, Bagdad should not be treated as an enemy either. Turkey seeks to bully the PUK to turn against the PKK. They have already blocked flights to Slemani, with serious economic consequences, and they threaten further action.

A Turkish drone strike in Kalar on Friday appears to have been [aimed](#) at a building linked to Tevgera Azadî, which is associated with Öcalan's Kurdish Freedom Movement. This choice of target is believed to have been a message to the Iraqi foreign minister.

Another refugee from southeast Turkey (North Kurdistan) was the victim of a [targeted](#) assassination in Slemani last Thursday. Abdulkadir Sabri Toprak, a doctor, was killed by four bullets. Suspicion has immediately turned to the Turkish Intelligence organisation, MİT.

Yesterday, Erdoğan [reiterated](#) his plan to control a continuous strip of border land in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq where the PKK guerrillas have their bases, claiming that Turkey would have complete control of this and end the guerrillas by the summer. Such a strip would be continuous with his plans for Syria, and he boasted, “We are making preparations that will unsettle those who think they can undermine Turkey with a ‘Terroristan’ on its southern borders”.

Turkey has recently suffered some serious losses in their relentless fight against the PKK – probably many more losses than they have admitted to. A guerrilla resistance is very hard to vanquish. That is why the role of the KDP in aiding Turkey is so significant, and why they are trying to persuade others to join them.

In Iran

Iran has produced another crop of horrific statistics. In 2023, 843 people were [executed](#) by the state in what can only be understood as a regime of terror.

On Friday, Iran held an election to decide on their parliament and Assembly of Experts for the next eight years. Huge numbers of would-be candidates were vetoed and unable to stand, ensuring that power stays with “Conservative elites, dominated by the Revolutionary Guard”, as Fehim Taştekin [explains](#) in Gazete Duvar. Although voting was [declared](#) a religious duty, many groups called for a boycott. Many candidates withdrew and turnout was only 41%, the lowest the Islamic Republic has seen. There were also high numbers of invalid ballot papers. Mozhgan Eftekhari, Jina Amini’s mother, wrote on Instagram, beside a picture of her daughter, “Where there is no freedom, if voting changed anything they wouldn’t let you vote.” Taştekin comments that the election has ensured that those in power continue in control, though with weakened legitimacy – but that there are many reasons for not voting, and radical change will need more than this.

In Turkey

Turkey is gearing up for local elections at the end of this month – cue arrests of journalists, and police violence against Kurdish politicians. Three journalists in Wan were [detained](#) in police raids on their homes on 27 February and held for three days, accused of “providing financial support to terrorism”. A DEM Party co-mayor candidate for İdil Municipality was [detained](#); the police [attacked](#) a DEM Party public gathering in Şirnex; and a DEM Party district building in Bursa was [attacked](#) with an axe. There was also an attempt

to disqualify two DEM Party co-mayoral candidates in Îdir, but they were [reinstated](#) after a large public outcry.

A lot of Turkish news concerns the law courts. The following recent examples suggest that the friction between the government and the Constitutional Court still has some way to run.

The DEM Party has been [arguing](#) against the government's Judicial Reform Package, which one MP described as a law that "could imprison anyone walking on the street". Among other things, this law would reinstate the charge of "committing a crime on behalf of a terrorist organisation without being a member," which the Constitutional Court ruled against as dangerously ambiguous last September, and make it an independent crime.

Meanwhile, the Constitutional Court has [published](#) its decision to annul many of the articles in Erdoğan's 1st Presidential Decree Law, issued in July 2018. These include the transfer of powers from municipalities to the government, government control of professional agencies for architects and engineers, and articles based on the collection of personal data.

A glimpse of hope

After all these troubles, I want to finish with a glimpse of the optimism of Stranên Kezîya Sor. Returning to North and East Syria, we can find the beginning of a week of celebrations for International Women's Day in the former ISIS capital of [Raqqqa](#); and, despite all the pressures, a new university campus has been [opened](#) in Kobanê. Much further afield, in a measure of the universal importance of Öcalan and his ideas, Abahlali base Mjondolo, the South African Shack Dwellers movement, have [expressed](#) their solidarity with the Kurdish Freedom Movement and with the call for Öcalan's release.

**Sarah Glynn is a writer and activist – check her [website](#) and follow her on [Twitter](#).*