

# Safeguarding journalism and heading into war: a weekly news review

In their principled support of Julian Assange, the Council of Europe have acted according to their founding purpose. At the same time, they have proved incapable of meeting the challenges of the spreading war, or even of disciplining Council members who flout their own rules. The week's review looks at the situation of Kurdish politics in a fast-changing Middle East, through the prism of the Council.

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I spent last week at the quarterly Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and although this is an organisation of sometimes questionable relevance, the week's proceedings well illustrate the situation facing the Kurds and its relationship to wider events. Besides our two Peoples' Equality and Democracy (DEM) Party deputies, who are part of the Turkish delegation, the Council was also visited by other Kurdish guests:

DEM Party co-chair Tülay Hatimoğulları and deputy co-chair Özlem Gündüz; Abdullah Öcalan's lawyer İbrahim Bilmez; and the European representative of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria [Abdul Karim Omar](#).

### **Julian Assange at the Council of Europe**

It was an important week for the Council. In general, they never fail to disappoint by not taking a stand for the issues that they exist to defend: Human rights, democracy and the rule of law. But in the case of Julian Assange, they were firm in defending his rights – and thus the rights of all journalists. This week they held a debate on the case and how to prevent it becoming a precedent for further transnational oppression. In recognition of the importance of the Council's intervention and potential future role, Assange came to Strasbourg from Australia for his first public appearance since his release from the UK's cruellest prison. His briefing to the Council's Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights was powerful and moving, and also frightening in its exposure of the politicisation of justice systems and the crossing of red lines that are meant to preserve freedoms. You [can watch the whole event online](#).

### **War in the Middle East**

But, as Irish Senator Paul Gavan [pointed out in the debate](#) on the Assange case, "This week we saw the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe at its worst, and at its best." In contrast to Assange's "powerful testimony" was the Assembly's "continuing refusal to take a stand against the genocide being prosecuted against the Palestinian people".

The Parliamentary Assembly has refused to hold a vote on the issue of Palestine since [passing a motion in January](#) that echoed the European Parliament in tying a ceasefire to the dismantling of Hamas and unconditional return of the Israeli hostages. The January vote effectively gave a green light to Israeli aggression. This week (in a debate without a vote) we saw much hand-wringing about the extent of death and destruction in Gaza – often without naming the perpetrator – but hardly a mention of the role of those who supply arms; and still we hear repeated the tired lies of Israeli "democracy" and the "right to defend themselves". Genocide is not defence.

In the "worst" list, Gavan could also have mentioned speeches, in both the Gaza debate and the subsequent debate on Iran, that demonstrate a frightening naivety and simplistic black and white thinking. There can be few things more alarming than a "human rights" body talking about an "axis of evil" and "barbarians attacking civilisation". Both these phrases were used by Ukrainian deputy, Oleksii Goncharenko, who is chair of the Council's migration committee. Listening to the debate, there seemed little chance that many people would heed the warning from French Deputy Emmanuel Fernandes that, "We must not contribute to feeding the simplistic vision of the world according to which an entirely virtuous Western democratic bloc is engaged in a war of civilisation against a group of barbaric or demonic states." That simplistic vision has got hold of many of our political leaders and is leading us away from hopes of peace.

As Israel bombards and invades Lebanon – I believe this is the correct term for entering another country by force of arms, though it isn't much used – the only thing that pundits can agree on is that danger of even further expansion of the war is growing. [Al-Monitor](#) discusses the possibility of further Israeli attacks on Syria – even the targeting of President Assad – and posits different possible scenarios. None contains much hope, especially for the Kurds and the survival of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.

Social activist Scharo Maroof [argues](#) that Turkish mercenary groups and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS) are planning to use the current chaos to attack Syrian troops and force Syria into an agreement along Turkish lines, at the expense, of course, of the Kurds.

It is not just western nations and local powers who have no interest in Kurdish hopes or the survival of the Autonomous Administration. Russia's strategic alliance with Turkey makes them ready to sacrifice the Kurds, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov consistently and [constantly mis-portrays them](#) as separatists, when they have always made clear that they are looking for a democratic future within Syria (not that separatism should be punished either).

Meanwhile, Turkey has not let up in their attacks on North and East Syria. On Thursday, [two people were killed](#) when a Turkish drone targeted their van on the road between Qamishli (Qamişlo) and Amuda (Amûdê).

War makes refugees and by Friday it was estimated that some 235,000 people, almost 2/3 of them returning Syrians, [had left Lebanon for Syria](#). On 1 October, 7,700 were recorded as having [reached North and East Syria](#), where the authorities have opened three new camps. Everywhere in Syria is short of resources and funds, and this includes the autonomous North and East. The Autonomous Administration has made clear that the refugees are welcome, but resources will be even further stretched.

### **Migration and Asylum**

Even as they enable the spread of war, European countries are making it harder for refugees to find asylum; and right-wing parties are spreading anti-refugee rhetoric to garner popular support. This week saw the far right Freedom Party gain the support of 29% of [voters in Austria](#), the biggest share of the vote. And in another indication of right-wing resurgence, the Council of Europe's Václav Havel Prize for "outstanding civil society action in defence of human rights" was awarded to a [leading right-wing Venezuelan politician](#) who has called for external military intervention to help overthrow her country's president.

In the Council of Europe's debate on migrant smuggling and missing migrants, Norbert Kleinwächter, on behalf of the Conservatives, painted all migrants as criminals. He began his speech with "Let's cut the sweet talk", and accused the Rapporteur for Missing Migrants, who had spent four years on rescue boats in the Mediterranean, of aiding the smugglers and having blood on his hands.

Last Saturday, Germany announced that they had reached [a new deal with Turkey](#) to deport up to 15,561 Turkish citizens at the rate of 500 a week. These are people who have not been granted asylum by the German authorities, but that does not mean that they will be safe in Turkey. A high proportion are Kurds, reflecting the high proportion of asylum seekers who are Kurds. İsmail Parmaksız, head of Mala Kurda Berlin-Brandenburg, claims that “many of those being deported are wanted individuals in Turkey”. If you are politically active, it doesn’t take much to become “wanted”.

Turkey’s role as Europe’s anti-immigrant policeman provides an important reason for European countries to be reluctant to act against Turkish wishes. This combines with growing anti-immigrant feeling to make the position of refugees increasingly precarious.

Two further Kurdish activists have come [under threat of extradition from France](#) to certain imprisonment in Turkey. The tribunal hearing of one, Enver Keklik, is due to be held on Monday in Marseille.

## **The DEM Party**

Returning to our DEM Party delegation at the Council of Europe, Co-chair Tülay Hatimoğulları was able to meet a range of leading figures in the organisation and update them on the situation in Turkey, as well as addressing the Left Group, and finding time for [an interview with me for Medya News](#). Hatimoğulları told the Left Group that the DEM Party expects the Council to do more to make sure that Turkey implements the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, and that this would result in a more democratic atmosphere in Turkey. She specifically mentioned the imprisonment of the former co-chairs of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, and that of Can Atalay and Osman Kavala, imprisoned for their roles in the Gezi Park protests. The DEM Party expects the Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) to make Turkey implement their recommendations, and they expect the Congress of Local Authorities to take a stronger position against the removal of elected mayors. Hatimoğulları described Turkey’s prisons as becoming torture centres, and spoke of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan’s prison isolation and the denial of his Right to Hope for the possibility of release. She explained that the party believes that a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish Question will help to democratise Turkey. At the same time, she observed that European countries have bargained away their criticism of Turkey’s abuse of human rights in exchange for Turkey keeping refugees out of Europe.

Hatimoğulları referred to the state oppression that is applied to the party. The poisonous atmosphere also encourages violent attacks, and last Saturday [shots were fired](#) at a DEM Party district office in Istanbul.

The cheerleader for the crackdown on the party has been Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is part of the ruling alliance. At the opening of parliament, to everyone’s surprise, Bahçeli [offered his hand](#) to the DEM Party’s other co-chair, Tuncer Bakırhan, and stated “We are entering a new era. When seeking peace globally we must ensure peace within our own country.” This apparent

about-turn has left the pundits questioning. The DEM Party is wary of empty gestures and waits to see if this will be followed with concrete action.

### **Öcalan's lawyer**

İbrahim Bilmez, a lawyer acting for Öcalan, was also at the Council to meet officials, and on Wednesday he spoke at a [press conference](#) hosted by DEM Party deputy, Berdan Öztürk. He focussed on Öcalan's case, which is central to Turkey's mistreatment of prisoners more generally.

Öcalan is held incommunicado, and there has been no news from him for 42 months. This isolation is considered a form of torture. The CPT visited two years ago, but Turkey has not given permission for them to publish their report, as CPT rules require. Bilmez observed that recently, in the case of Azerbaijan, the [CPT published their report](#) without Azerbaijan's consent, and that the same could be done for Turkey.

In Azerbaijan's case, the decision to publish was made in July, after Azerbaijan stopped all cooperation. Interestingly, the comparison between the situations of Azerbaijan and Turkey was made twice in the [debate on Azerbaijan](#) on Tuesday afternoon. On the first occasion, Sir Christopher Chope for the European Conservatives argued that the Council's suspension of the Azerbaijan delegation was unfair discrimination because the behaviour of Turkey was much worse. On the second, Frank Schwabe, leader of the Socialist Group, claimed that Azerbaijan was worse because Turkey allowed monitoring by the Council. Clearly both countries flout fundamental rules of the Council, and its Convention on Human Rights, seriously and repeatedly.

Azerbaijan's dismal human rights record was given another blow with the [fatal stabbing](#) of a critic of the government who was living in exile in Mulhouse, a bit over an hour's drive from Strasbourg, and who died on the day of the Council debate – though no one referred to this. That a petrostate, which abuses human rights and threatens its neighbour, should have been chosen to host the next meeting of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP) is a frightening indication of the state of international politics.

But to return to our meeting. Bilmez also talked about the denial of Öcalan's Right to Hope, which the European Court of Human Rights ruled as torture in 2014. When his original death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, Turkey created the new category of aggravated life imprisonment without possibility of parole, which is regarded as a sort of drawn-out death sentence. Now this has also been applied to thousands of other prisoners. Turkey has even refused the demand from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers to state how many are affected. In his meeting with the CPT the previous day, Bilmez had given the example of a man kept in prison despite being too ill to do anything for himself. That morning, he had died, still in prison. Turkey has done nothing in response to the European Court's ruling, and the Committee of Ministers recently gave them yet another year to make the required changes.

With respect to Öcalan's illegal isolation, Bilmez noted that the European Court of Human Rights has still to make a decision, though it is now twelve years since the lawyers submitted an application. The isolation has also been the subject of repeated appeals to Turkey's Constitutional Court, which, after nine years, has similarly failed to issue any ruling. On Friday, hundreds of lawyers [protested in front of the court](#) in Ankara.

### **No escape**

The final debate in the Council on Tuesday looked at the protection of Iranian human rights defenders in Council of Europe member states, but it didn't consider dangers enabled by those states themselves. Turkey and Iran are political rivals; however, when it comes to the Kurds, they are united in their enmity. Sirwan Fakhri was a [political activist in Saqqez](#) in Iran. He took refuge in Turkey, but was refused asylum and went on to Iraq. He was expelled from Iraq as a result of Iraq's agreement with Iran, and is now back in Turkey. He has been arrested and threatened with extradition to Iran, where he expects to get tortured and given a long prison sentence.

The Council of Europe's response to the Assange case provided a rare glimpse of what the organisation was established to do. When I listened to Assange address the Council committee, I tried to imagine a similar scene with Öcalan – but that seems a very long way off.

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