

Turkey's war on hope – a weekly news review

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Today, Kurds from across Europe will gather in Paris to call for a stop on Turkey being able to kill Kurds in France with impunity. On Thursday, Turkey's compromised courts delivered a further blow to the vestiges of Turkish democracy and agreed to block the state funding due to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest party in the country's parliament. Meanwhile, the Iranian revolution continues without let-up in the actions of the revolutionaries nor in the brutality of the regime. And commentators have been speculating on the possibility and possible outcomes of an agreement between Turkey and Syria.

Erdoğan and Assad

Besê Hozat, co-chair of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) and member of the General Presidential Council of the PKK, [gave](#) her analysis of the aims and relationships of the different powers involved in northern Syria in an interview with Medya Haber. Although the war in Ukraine has changed the balance of forces, she points out that the high-level talks between Turkey, Syria, and Russia that took place ten days ago have been achieved after several years of secret meetings, and that they are guided by long-term Turkish aims, shared by both the government and the main opposition, of suppressing any sort of Kurdish autonomy.

Russia has always wanted to see their client, President Assad, back in control over the whole of Syria. They use the threat of letting Turkey have their way over North and East Syria to try and blackmail the Autonomous Administration into giving up their political and military autonomy and returning to centralised rule from Damascus. The Ukraine war has made Russia much more reliant on good relations with Turkey, and vice versa (as I discussed last week). Hozat observes that “Russia is making concessions to Turkey regarding the Kurds”, and that Russia wants to see their friend President Erdoğan continue in power, and she claims that Russia also uses the possibility of a deal between the Autonomous Administration and Damascus to get Ankara to pre-empt this and fall in line with Assad’s demands.

Hozat explains that “Turkey wants to benefit from Russia to eliminate the Rojava revolution”, and that Turkey has accepted that this can be achieved with control from Damascus. To persuade Russia and the Syrian government to agree to an arrangement that meets Turkish aims, Turkey will try to exploit the threat of the Islamist groups that the Turkish military has supported – but controlling this will be far from easy.

Assad’s aim is to regain control over the whole area. He doesn’t share Russia’s desire for Erdoğan to remain in power, since Turkey’s main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), has long called for repairing links with Syria. Hozat argues that it is not in the interest of Damascus to fight and kill the Kurds, but rather to negotiate and reach an

agreement with them. She argues that Damascus understands the importance of the Arab-Kurdish alliance in allowing Syria to survive and to free themselves from ISIS. She notes that “From the beginning, Damascus did not pursue such a colonialist and genocidal policy as the Turks did against the Kurds... It would be political suicide for Damascus to act on the basis of Turkish politics. The government in Damascus and the Syrian state have sufficient experience and are aware of this.” She leaves the door open for an agreement between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Regime.

Amberin Zaman, in Al-Monitor, [adds that](#), although the United States “has not delivered a fraction of what the Syrian Kurds were hoping for”, the American presence could give the Kurds greater leverage in their own negotiations with Damascus.

Fehim Taştekin, in Duvar, [asks](#) what could make Syria come to an agreement with Turkey, and adds an economic imperative. Turkey might be able to help Syria overcome crushing Western sanctions.

While there is talk of a meeting of foreign ministers later this month, there are still huge differences to bridge. We do not know what was said in Moscow. A report in Syria’s Al-Watan – owned by Assad’s cousin – [claims](#), on the basis of unnamed sources, that “the gathered parties emphasised that the PKK militia is a proxy militia for America and Israel and poses the greatest danger to Syria and Turkey”, but this formula, which clearly echoes Turkish government discourse, has not appeared elsewhere, except as a quote from Al-Watan. This twisted interpretation of events may have been discussed, but seems unlikely to have been agreed on. The process is still at an early stage, and, as Hozat points out, it will not be easy to make an agreement, and also not easy to implement one.

Syria’s main demand from Turkey is withdrawal from the occupied areas and an end to Turkish support for opposition forces. But Turkey has made clear that they will not withdraw until their concerns over “terror” are satisfied. News of the latest meeting was [greeted](#) with protests from Turkey’s Islamist mercenaries and from Turkey’s allies in Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). These groups have the potential to cause major damage, including within Turkey

itself. Turkification and ethnic cleansing will leave a long-lasting disruptive legacy.

Erdoğan wants an agreement that he can present as a victory in the upcoming elections: an agreement, or at least the prospect of one, that allows Turkey to ensure that Kurds have no influence within 30 km of the border, and that enables Turkey to send Syrian refugees back to Syria. The proximity of those elections has made him all the more ready to use any means to maintain power. As noted, Russia is keen to see Erdoğan's political survival. Syria might prefer to draw negotiations out till after the election, though Turkish threats may make this harder.

Meanwhile, Turkey continues their daily attacks on the people and infrastructure of North and East Syria, and Damascus continues to put pressure on the isolated autonomous areas through a blockade on essential goods, including fuel. Last week, this blockade was [blamed](#) for the [deaths of two children](#) from the winter cold, a four-year-old boy in Shehba, and a 17-day-old baby in Sheikh Maqsoud.

Turkey

Within Turkey itself, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Government is preparing for elections by clamping down even harder on the opposition, and especially on the leftist pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The Constitutional Court is still considering the case for the party's closure, but on Thursday, they pre-empted their own legal processes and agreed to block the HDP's access to government funds as an "administrative measure". In Turkey, parties that receive over 7% of the vote get government funding that reflects the strength of their electoral support. The HDP was [due to](#) receive 539 million TL, the equivalent of 27 million Euros, in just a few days' time.

Twice before, the court had rejected requests to cut the HDP's funding, but this time, though the case had not changed, they succumbed to political pressure. Party Spokesperson, Ebru Günay, [stated](#) that procedural principles had been trampled on and that the decision lacked legitimacy. The HDP had had no opportunity to put forward their objections, and had not even received

an official statement from the court. Like everyone else, they learnt about the decision from the press. HDP Co-Chairperson, Tayip Temel, listed some of the legally baseless arguments that had been used to support the court decision. These included [statements](#) made in the parliament, and people simply stating that Abdullah Öcalan is an interlocutor in the solution of the Kurdish problem and in a dialogue for peace.

Of course, the HDP are adamant that this will not stop them campaigning. They are a party that has always depended on mass committed grassroots support. The party's foreign affairs office [tweeted](#), "Reminder: HDP got its first electoral victory in 2015 without any treasury aid and AKP lost the majority in the National Assembly. We can do it again!" But people still need to be paid salaries, offices need to be run, material needs to be printed, people need to travel, and raising money takes time and energy that could have been used for other things.

The ruling AKP well understands about stopping treasury aid as they had their own funding stopped in 2008, when they narrowly [escaped](#) being banned for anti-secular activities. However, that decision was made after a full court hearing and just a year after the party had been elected into government on a substantial majority.

Sezgin Tanrikulu, an MP from the CHP, [claimed](#) on Twitter that the decision was "null and void" because it needed a 2/3 majority vote, but, more generally, the CHP gives little cause for hope.

On the day that the third biggest party in the parliament had their government funding stopped in the run-up to a general election, the six-party opposition group, dominated by the CHP, met to discuss their plans to "restore our republic to a true and complete democratic order". The four-page [document](#) summarising their discussions makes no mention of the HDP. In fact, it claims that the sentencing of the CHP mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu, is "the last striking example of the politicisation of the judiciary".

The meeting did, however, find time to discuss the murder, on 30 December, of Sinan Ateş, the young former leader of the Grey Wolves, the paramilitary group attached to the far-right nationalist National Movement Party (MHP). This has the hallmarks of a political murder, but the concern being shown by CHP leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, is about [more than the nature](#) of Ateş's death. Kılıçdaroğlu demonstrates disconcerting support for a man he calls "One of the most valued names in the idealist [i.e. Turkish Nationalist] movement".

The case for closing the HDP is based on a separate case against 108 people, including leading party members. This is known as the Kobanê case because the defendants are accused of insurrection and murder for calling on people to come onto the streets and protest against the ISIS siege of Kobanê in 2014. The protestors were attacked by members of the security forces and right-wing counter-demonstrators, and around fifty people lost their lives. On Monday, the first hearing took place in a second, related case. The 89 defendants, including former deputy mayors, city council members, and members of the HDP's Party Assembly, are [accused](#) of financing the protests.

Since 21 December, HDP politicians have also been keeping up a daily vigil to call for an end to the isolation of imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, and for a return to peace negotiations. Of course, they have not been left to protest as they wanted. The MPs observe that the mentality that produced the isolation in İmralı prison has been imposed on the whole of society, and the Turkish authorities have proved the MPs' point about government authoritarianism by putting obstacles in their path. The MPs have been [giving statements](#) outside the parliamentary assembly as they are now prevented from reaching the Justice Ministry where their vigil began.

The sadistic cruelty of Turkish state violence was in full evidence in Muş, when the body of Mîr Perwer, the musician killed in the recent triple murder in Paris, was brought to his home village for burial. HDP politicians joined his family at the airport to receive the body, but the police abducted it, and soldiers and military police prevented all but family members from attending the burial. Hundreds [tried](#) to reach the village on foot and were attacked with tear gas, water cannon and plastic bullets, and many were detained.

Disrupting funerals has become a standard part of the government's repertory. Similar restrictions were applied in October to the funeral of Nagihan Akarsel, who was [murdered](#) by the Turkish state outside her home in Sulaymaniyah, and the approach to this latest funeral seems even more violent.

This week, Turkey has been accused of being behind yet another extraterritorial assassination in the autonomous district of Şengal [Sinjar] in Iraq. Menal Mêrdîn, who had spent twenty years in Turkish prisons, had been working on a book about the ISIS massacre of the Yazidis. When he was [killed](#), Turkish reconnaissance flights were going overhead.

Iran

In Iran, the state is even more brutal and the violence even more arbitrary. Twitter continues to show a progression of images of people who have disappeared or been killed or threatened with death sentences, and just occasionally someone who has been reprieved. Protests against violence and deaths are met with more violence and more deaths.

On Tuesday, the regime hung large posters to mark the death anniversary of Qasem Soleimani, the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp commander who was killed by a US drone in 2020; and these proved conveniently flammable. The nature of Soleimani's death had led some Iranians to nickname this date "Kotlet Day" after Iranian meat patties. After celebrity chef and restaurant owner, Navab Ebrahimi, [shared](#) a recipe for kotlets, he was arrested and sent to the notorious Evin Prison, while his restaurant was sealed.

On Thursday, Iran International reported that the fatal shooting of a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp, who had been hit outside his home by a gunman on a motorbike, was an internal job by the Revolutionary Guards' Intelligence Organisation. He had been found to have been too lenient on protestors, and to have been in touch with others who felt the same. This man was [said to be](#) using a play station device to keep in touch with protestors.

In Europe

There are not many people in Europe who would give open support to Iran, but, despite all that the Turkish government has done, they can still rely on the support of “friends” in the UK and the EU who, for their own reasons, don’t want to upset their relationship with Turkey. It seems that this support can include disrupting access to funerals too. On Tuesday, a funeral service for the three murdered Kurdish activists was held in Paris, and a delegation of five people tried to attend from community organisations in London. British police stopped them at passport control before they entered the Channel Tunnel. They were detained for six hours, their vehicle was [searched](#), and they were asked questions unrelated to any criminality, such as, why did they want to attend the funeral? and did Turkish intelligence carry out the attack in Paris?

In Germany, Die Linke MP, Gökay Akbulut, put a question to the federal government about the number of German citizens banned from travelling abroad since 2018. The ministry of the Interior [gave](#) a figure of 131 bans, half (66) of them in this last year. These bans, which have no basis in law, mainly affect left wing activists and Kurds.

And so, back to Paris, which has been the scene of daily demonstrations since the murders on 23 December. Plans for today’s mass demonstration have been underway for a long time, as Monday will be the tenth anniversary of the assassination of three leading Kurdish women at the instigation (as is generally acknowledged) of the Turkish state. But the demonstration has acquired a new urgency with the second triple murder. Kurds and their friends demand that France prevent Turkey from assassinating Kurds on French soil, and that the two triple murders of Kurdish activists – from ten years ago and from December – are fully and transparently investigated and the instigators brought to justice.

Kurdish conviction that the most recent murders were also instigated by Turkey was only strengthened by a comment, the day after the murders, from Turkey’s aggressive Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu – as no doubt he intended. Soylu [claimed](#) that, “Tayyip Erdoğan will not only purge the terrorists in Turkey, but also the terrorists in the world.” Terrorists for Erdoğan and Soylu

are almost all Kurds. Erdoğan has shown himself unafraid to take his war against the Kurds into other countries, and it suits him fine that while the Kurds are made to feel that nowhere is safe for them, the government of France avoids investigating Turkey's involvement and exposing their culpability. We are yet to see any official suggestion that the French authorities will make a serious investigation into wider links behind the man who pulled the trigger fifteen days ago, or any indication that they will stop stalling on their investigation into the conspiracy behind the 2013 murders. However, support for a proper search for the truth has been strong from left parties and from trade unions. This week, the cultural centre where the recent attacks took place was visited by the mayor of Paris and a delegation of councillors. Mayor Anne Hidalgo, a socialist whose first term of office saw her lead the city through the major ISIS attacks of 2015, gave a very warm message of support that included the [promise](#), "As the Paris delegation, we will do our best to ensure justice". But it will need a lot more pressure to make Justice a reality, in Paris, and in general.

For many people, myself included, who only really got to know the Kurds at the time of the Battle of Kobanê and the hope of the 2013-15 peace talks, the current situation is especially hard to comprehend; but the Kurds themselves have gone through many decades of struggle and disappointed hopes, and they will go on struggling – this time with much wider support.

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