

Pre-announced war crimes and mass detentions – a weekly news review

Turkish bombs are raining down on the vital infrastructure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, and across Turkey itself Kurdish activists are being rounded up and detained. Turkey is determined to crush all that the Kurds have built up, and they have claimed Sunday's PKK attack in Ankara as a pretext, even though that attack is unconnected to North and East Syria or to the activists being detained.

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Since Thursday, Turkish bombs have been raining down on the vital infrastructure of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria causing power blackouts, destroying the oil wells that are the mainstay of the economy, and bringing fear and death. All week, across Turkey itself, Kurdish activists and politicians have been rounded up and detained. But I begin this review with an event that has no connection with the Administration or population of North and East Syria, nor with the hundreds of people who have been woken by Turkish police at their door. It has no connection, but it is being used by Turkey as a casus belli for an all-out attack on the Kurds that begs comparison with the Sri Lankan treatment of the Tamils.

On Sunday morning a small silver van drove up to the gate of Turkey's police headquarters, which is attached to the Ministry of the Interior. Two men got out and ran towards the gate. One blew himself up, the other was shot dead before he could detonate the explosives he was wearing. The PKK has [claimed responsibility](#) for the attack.

Mass detentions of activists and politicians

That afternoon, the co-speakers of the Green Left Party (the current designation of the leftist pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party or HDP) gave a [statement](#) to the press for the start of the new parliamentary session. Right at the beginning they said, "We find the attack that took place this morning unacceptable. As the executors of democratic politics, as is known in this country, we have struggled and will continue to struggle for a country where all forms of violence have no basis, and peace and tranquillity can be established."

This did not prevent members of the party being detained in the purge of Kurdish activists that followed the Ankara attack. Kurdish activists are detained every week for entirely peaceful activities, which are all labelled as aiding "terrorism", and the state has used the attack as an excuse for an extra-large number of detentions across the country – [at least 246 in five days](#). However, there is no reason to believe that these people had any connection to the attack or to the PKK.

War crimes against North and East Syria

And, as predictably as night follows day, Turkey's foreign minister, Hadan Fidan, [has claimed](#), with no evidence, that the attackers came through Syria. He has used this fiction to present the People's Defence Units (YPG) of the Syrian Kurds – which Turkey refuses to differentiate from the PKK – as also responsible for the attack. A similar thing happened last November, when Turkey used a bomb attack in Istanbul as an excuse for attacks on North and East Syria. The Istanbul attack clearly had no connection to the YPG, nor to the PKK, but it cannot be a coincidence that Turkey has reignited this earlier fiction with the [claim](#) that a man they assassinated in North and East Syria on Tuesday was one of the people who planned last year's bombing.

Fidan made a public announcement that Turkey would attack the infrastructure and energy facilities of North and East Syria, which he described as "legitimate targets". Targeting vital infrastructure is a war crime, but Fidan is confident that he can publicise his intentions to do this without suffering political consequences.

It would be a war crime even if the YPG were attacking Turkey, but they have never attacked Turkey and are not doing so now. Mazloun Abdi, Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which includes the YPG, [tweeted](#) on Wednesday, "Ankara's attack perpetrators haven't passed through our region as Turkish officials claim, and we aren't party to Turkey's internal conflict nor [do] we encourage escalation. Turkey is looking for pretexts to legitimize its ongoing attacks on our region and to launch a new military aggression that is of our deep concern."

The PKK has also [stated that](#) the men who carried out the attack did not go from North and East Syria, and nor did they "have any relations with those who carry out legal politics".

Turkish attacks have hit electricity stations, [blacking out cities and towns](#) with all their essential services such as hospitals, water pumping and treatment stations, and bakeries. They have hit oil fields, threatening not just fuel supplies but the main source of revenue for a region that is desperately short

of funds and is still struggling to rebuild after the destruction caused by ISIS. They have hit the gas plant that supplies the region's fuel for cooking and heating. They have destroyed hospitals in Kobanê and Derik and targeted a camp for people displaced by Turkey's 2019 invasion. They have hit grain silos in Amude. They have hit an ice factory and a factory for animal food, and they have targeted private cars. By Friday they had [killed](#) eight civilians, six members of the Asayish who were guarding infrastructure facilities, and one SDF fighter. By the time this is published, more will have died. And Turkey's attacks have dealt another major blow to the security and future of the whole region. Drone attacks are now being boosted by military aircraft, and have been accompanied by intense shelling from the ground.

The SDF have [fought back](#) against Turkish occupation forces, but they have not got the weapons to prevent air attacks.

When making his threat, Fidan advised third parties to stay away – clearly a reference to the United States, who, much to Turkey's annoyance, are in an alliance with the SDF in the battle against ISIS. However, the US State Department has [told journalists](#) that they "have not received enough adequate information" to confirm a link with Syria, and that they continue to see the PKK and YPG as separate entities. On Thursday, after multiple warnings, the United States [shot down](#) an armed Turkish drone operating near their base in Syria which they saw as a potential threat to American soldiers. This is the first time that they have brought down a Turkish aircraft, and it was followed by a phone call between defence secretaries to try and diffuse tensions

Iraq

Turkey's first response to the Ankara attack was to increase their already heavy bombardments of the PKK's bases in Iraq. They claim to have [killed many PKK guerrillas](#), while the PKK claims to have had no losses. The Iraqi government is under pressure from Turkey to declare the PKK a terrorist organisation, which they have refused to do, and to force the PKK out of the country, which would not be easy. They have no sympathy for the PKK, but their bigger concern is Turkey's invasion of their sovereignty and occupation

of Iraqi land. It has also been [argued](#) that Iraq's dominant Shia militias may regard the presence of the PKK as a useful barrier to further Turkish influence. The Iraqi government often protests Turkey's attacks, but can do little to stop them. The Iraqi defence minister visited Ankara for discussions on Thursday.

International media

International media, which barely notices Turkey's constant violence against the Kurds, and hardly mentioned the PKK's unilateral ceasefire following the earthquake, was quick to report the PKK's attack in Ankara. They have produced only cursory reports on Turkey's follow-up attacks and detentions, always quoting Turkey's claims.

The PKK

The PKK is in an invidious position. They have succeeded in helping the Kurdish people find a renewed belief in their culture and worth, but they have not managed to end their external oppression. The PKK's fighters in the Iraqi mountains have been under constant attack, and although they have produced increasing evidence of Turkey's use of illegal chemical weapons against them, the world has turned a deaf ear and international organisations refuse to investigate. At the same time, the Turkish government has been increasing their oppression of Kurdish activists and Kurdish culture, Kurdish politicians are being put before politicised courts and imprisoned, and the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, who is recognised as leader by millions of Kurds, has been denied all contact with the outside world for 2 ½ years. On the back of his election victory, President Erdoğan seems determined to crush all Kurds and Kurdishness through force of arms, and the main opposition party offers little hope of anything better. PKK guerrillas have been taking part in a gruelling struggle to prevent the Turkish government from destroying their mountain bases and from gaining control of an even larger part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and they clearly wanted to move onto the offensive and to demonstrate that they can still penetrate the heart of the Turkish state. The PKK [state](#) that the aim was to send a warning message on the first day of parliament. Whether that message will be understood, history will be the judge.

Abdullah Öcalan and the resolution of the Kurdish Question

The [statement](#) by the Green Left/HDP from which I quoted at the beginning, goes on to discuss Turkey's problems, arguing that failure to resolve the Kurdish Question is central to Turkey's crisis. Money is spent on war, while poverty increases along with lawlessness and injustice, so that "As long as the Kurdish issue is left unresolved, the people of Turkey are paying a heavy price". This statement has been deliberately misquoted, and Erdoğan's chief advisor tweeted a [misogynistic attack](#) on the party's co-chair, Çiğdem Kılıçgün Uçar, whom he accused of threatening the Turkish state and nation.

The Green Left/HDP statement stresses the need to create the conditions in which Öcalan can bring the Kurdish Question to a peaceful resolution – beginning with ending his isolation. Next week it will be 25 years since Öcalan was forced to leave Syria and begin the search for asylum that ended in his abduction to Turkey by an international conspiracy led by the CIA. There will be actions around the world calling for his freedom. The need for a negotiated and dignified peace has become all the more urgent with this week's events, and Öcalan can be the key to that peace.

Before going on to look at what is happening in Iran, I want to quote at length from the speech Öcalan wrote for the Newroz celebration in Diyarbakir (Amed) in 2013 near the beginning of the last peace talks. Those talks were brought to an end by Erdoğan, who made one of his 180 degree turns when he saw how the Kurds were winning control in northern Syria and winning parliamentary seats in Turkey. Since that time, Turkey has clamped down on Kurds and on freedoms more generally. They have imprisoned thousands of members of the HDP, including its co-chairs, MPs and mayors, and threaten to close down the party; but political talks remain the only root to a solution. Action needs to be focussed on widening the call and pressure for dialogue.

When Öcalan was last able to talk to his lawyers, in 2019, he told them that he had further developed his ideas for a political solution and, if given the opportunity, he could solve the Kurdish Question in a week. He has not been allowed to talk further, but here are his [words from ten years ago](#):

“The period of armed struggle is ending, and the door is opening to democratic politics. We are beginning a process focused on political, social and economic aspects; an understanding based on democratic rights, freedoms, and equality is growing. We have sacrificed much of our lives for the Kurdish people, we paid a high price. None of these sacrifices, none of our struggles, were in vain. For as a consequence of them, the Kurdish people have attained once again their identity and their roots. We have now reached the point of “silence the weapons and let the ideas and politics speak”. The modernist paradigm that has disregarded, excluded and denied us has been razed to the ground. Regardless of whether it be Turkish, Kurdish, Laz or Circassian – the blood spilled is flowing from a human being and from the bosom of this land. Witnessed by the millions of people who heed my call, I say a new era is beginning; an era where politics gain prominence over weapons. We have now arrived at the stage of withdrawing our armed forces outside the borders. I believe that all those who have believed in this cause and me are sensitive to the possible dangers of the process. This is not an end, but a new beginning. This is not abandoning the struggle – we are initiating a different struggle.”

Turkey would have us believe that Öcalan is held in prison because he presents a danger of violence. In fact, he presents the possibility of peace. It is peace that the Turkish Government is truly afraid of.

Iran

Meanwhile, in Iran, in a terrifying echo of events of a year ago, another young woman is in hospital in a coma after an attack by Iran’s morality police. This time, mindful of the movement sparked by Jina Amini’s death, the authorities are attempting to close down all communication. Sixteen-year-old [Armita Garawand](#), from the Kurdish-majority city of Kermanshah, is an art student living in Tehran. Witnesses report that on Sunday morning she was physically attacked by officers at a metro station for “non-compliance with the compulsory hijab”, and was taken to a military hospital with severe injuries. A smuggled photograph shows her in a coma in intensive care. Her family has been isolated under strict security and her fellow students have been threatened with severe consequences if they even share her photograph. The

Iranian authorities deny any physical altercation took place, claiming that Armita fainted from low blood pressure. When she was interviewed at the hospital in the presence of security forces, Armita's mother, Shahin Ahmadi said "We don't know; they said she has collapsed." On Wednesday evening Shahin Ahmadi was herself [violently arrested](#), and was only released the next evening after agreeing to avoid all publicity. The authorities are so scared of further information leaks that all the hospital staff have been replaced. The world is watching and the Iranian regime is determined that there will be nothing to see; but that, in itself, speaks volumes.

As I was writing this article a Syrian Kurdish friend was messaging me from Kobanê describing bombs falling nearby. All I could do was promise to tell people what is happening.

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