

Attacking refugee camps, and other everyday violence – a weekly news review

In Lavrio camp, near Athens, Kurdish refugees had established a system of autonomous organisation inspired by the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan. Beginning with the final clearance of the camp, under Turkish pressure, Sarah Glynn's weekly news review looks at the many ways Kurds are being oppressed in different parts of Kurdistan, often – but by no means only – by the Turkish government.

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Sarah Glynn

Refugees, [the United Nations states](#), “require international protection”. Instead, we have become appallingly used to articles about refugees left to drown or pushed back into danger. This week, reports also told of attacks on long-established refugee camps – of a lethal military assault on the Palestinians in Jenin, and of the clearance of the Lavrio camp near Athens that had sheltered Kurdish refugees. Jenin was generally reported with all the pro-Israel bias we have come to expect, but many people were rightly shocked to see a military assault on a refugee camp. What few of them will have known is that this has become a regular experience for the Kurdish refugees from Turkey who live in Makhmour camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Makhmour residents have not suffered such an intensive single attack as that which took place in Jenin, but they are frequently targeted by Turkish drones, sometimes fatally, and can never relax in peace. Similarly, few people will be aware of what has happened in Lavrio.

At the time of its clearance, the Lavrio camp housed some fifty people, but reporters from Kedistan Magazine who visited it at the end of 2017 [described](#) a community of 350. The physical structure of the camp dates back to the time of the Cold War, but its association with refugees from Turkey began with the 1980 coup. It sheltered members of the PKK and other Kurdish organisations and of Turkish left groups. In the last decade these were joined by refugees from the Syrian civil war, who were generally less politically engaged, and the camp was expanded with container-based bungalows. In 2017, the reporters found refugees from all four parts of Kurdistan, including many people from Turkey who had been elected representatives from the People's Democratic Party (HDP) or related organisations.

Like Makhmour, the camp was run by the residents in line with the organisational ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, though it was much smaller, and the population was transient and less socially homogenous. People stayed for 5 months to 2 ½ years as they tried to find acceptance elsewhere in Europe. The residents of each living space organised their lives communally – including practising self and communal criticism – and each space sent a representative to a central committee. There were subcommittees for different aspects of camp life, and numerous debates and communal activities. The camp also played a central part in Kurdish political actions in Greece. Closure of the camp means the destruction of a system of mutual support that was able to bring a measure of dignity and control to the Kurdish refugees and to provide another living example of Öcalan's ideas in action. It also means the loss of an important organisational centre.

The camp was the responsibility of the Greek government, which provided aid through the Greek Red Cross, but at the end of July 2017, under pressure from Turkey, all government aid was stopped. Then the only help came from local activists – the camp had good relations with the small town in which it was based – and from organisations such as [Heyva Sor](#), the Kurdish Red Crescent.

It is no secret that residents of the camp, like many politically active Kurds everywhere, were sympathetic to the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK, and other radical groups. The symbols are literally on the walls. But that does

not make the camp the nest of terrorism and terrorist training that President Erdoğan [portrays](#). Turkey has been putting pressure on Greece to close the camp for a few years, and while there is no love lost between Turkey and Greece, the Greek government clearly feels that the destruction of this microcosm of Kurdish autonomy is a small price to pay for improved relations with their powerful and aggressive neighbour. Poor physical conditions have been used as an excuse for closure.

Numbers had already fallen drastically when, earlier this year, the Greek government transferred out 100 refugees and [promised](#) to remove the remaining 50 and close the camp. On Wednesday, two days after the swearing in of Greece's new conservative government, Greek police [removed](#) those last remaining residents in a dawn raid.

Syrian refugees

Turkish aggression against Lavrio targeted refugees from Turkey. Refugees who have come to Turkey, from Syria and elsewhere, continue to be under pressure to return – and may be forcibly deported even if they have the temporary protection identity cards that entitle them to stay in Turkey. On Sunday, twelve Syrians and four Iraqis were [deported](#) from Turkey to Turkish-occupied Serê Kaniyê in northern Syria.

Yazidis

Turkey wants Syrians to return 'home', but when it comes to the Yazidis, who were displaced from their traditional home in Şengal (Sinjar) in Iraq during the genocide carried out by ISIS, Turkey wants to prevent their return. When, in 2014, both the Iraqi army and the Peşmerga of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) abandoned the Yazidis as ISIS attacked, many were saved by guerrillas from the PKK and by Syrian Kurds from the People's Protection Units (YPG). The PKK and YPG then helped the Yazidis set up their own defence forces and their own autonomous administration in Şengal, according to Öcalan's ideas. The Yazidis have never attacked Turkey, but Turkey does not want to allow their autonomous administration to survive. Turkish air attacks are aimed at

killing leading figures and dissuading the Yazidis from coming back to their homeland. Nevertheless, a steady trickle of people is leaving the IDP camps and [returning to Şengal](#), and the Şengal administration claims that around 15,000 families have made the move.

Other Yazidi families have tried to find safety as refugees in foreign countries, despite the difficulties and risks entailed. This week there are reports of Yazidis [hiding from the Greek border police](#) without food or water, and other Yazidis [waiting on the streets](#) in Greece.

Sulaymaniyah

Turkey continues to carry out military attacks on the mountains of northern Iraq, where they have established a network of military bases and are trying to destroy the PKK guerrillas; and they also exert control through non-military means. On Monday, they announced that they were [extending their ban](#) on flights between Turkey and Sulaymaniyah, the main city in the half of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that is controlled by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The PUK has not joined the KDP in supporting Turkey's attacks on the PKK, and has been working with the Syrian Democratic Forces of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The flight ban has serious consequences for Sulaymaniyah's economy.

North and East Syria

In North and East Syria itself, Turkey is carrying out a cruel and illegal assault through depriving the people of essential water supplies. Since the beginning of 2021, they have cut the flow of water in the Euphrates to less than half the amount stipulated in their 1987 agreement with Syria and Iraq, with disastrous consequences for agriculture, electricity supply, and general health. And, since they captured the Alouk pumping station in 2019, they have periodically stopped the water supply to Hasakah and the surrounding area, which is home to over a million people. On Monday, the Autonomous Administration [declared Hasakah a disaster area](#). They also accused the Russian and Syrian governments (which want to destroy the region's autonomy) of complicity.

Life is especially hard in the [IDP camps](#) that house people displaced by the Turkish invasion. Here, water shortage is combined with a shortage of services and food, as aid has also decreased.

On Wednesday, Turkish planes targeted Kobanê in another double tap attack. When an ambulance came to the site of the initial bombing it was hit by a second strike and two medical staff were injured.

Occupied Afrîn

In the occupied canton of Afrîn, Turkey and their mercenary militias continue their regime of pillage and demographic change. The latest half yearly [report](#) from the Afrin-Syria Human Rights Organisation records that 12 people were killed, 173 people were kidnapped for ransom, and 15,500 trees were cut down. New settlements, reminiscent of army barracks and funded by charities from Palestine, Kuwait, and Qatar, house families of the Islamist militias. [Resettled refugees](#), originally from other parts of Syria, will further contribute to demographic change in an area that was once predominantly Kurdish.

In this region, from where the majority of Kurds have been forced to flee and where Kurdish culture is being systematically destroyed, the Barzani Aid Foundation has [opened a cultural centre](#). The Foundation was started by Masrour Barzani, the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who works closely with Turkey's President Erdoğan, and whose party controls the KDP. Mezopotamya Agency observed that the centre's opening ceremony was decorated by red and white balloons – Turkish colours.

Turkey

More environmental and social destruction is taking place in North Kurdistan/southeast Turkey, areas of which are like a war zone as the Turkish army tries to root out PKK guerrillas. This week, villages in Bedîs have faced [indefinite all-day curfews](#), early-morning raids, and detentions, while the surrounding countryside has been bombed through the night. Forested mountains are [denuded of their trees](#) in the name of security, while villagers

are told that complaints can result in them being banned from their village. Çiğdem Özbaş of the Green Left Party [told Yeni Yaşam](#) that, due to the government's neoliberal policies, Turkey's forests had been handed over to be exploited by industries such as mining and energy and by large-scale tourism, and that forest areas had been turned into "rent centres". He observed that, "For Kurdistan, deforestation always comes with the discussion of security. They cut down trees to establish a fortress".

In Gever (Yüksekova), mountains and glacial lakes that are closed to local people in the name of "security" became the setting for a festival organised by local governors that [polluted](#) the pristine landscape and left it littered with debris.

While nature is destroyed, art is restricted by bans. [Bianet reports](#) that the latest half-year report by the Platform for Monitoring Freedom of Art "indicates that the pressure on artists is intensifying, marked by a surge in attacks and the continued practice of concert bans by authorities, which emerged as a concerning trend last year." Events in Kurdish are especially targeted.

On Tuesday, the poet Ahmet Telli was [sentenced](#) to ten months in prison for "terrorist propaganda" for reading [one of his poems](#) at a press conference in 2017.

At the same time, culture is exploited as a propaganda tool on behalf of the government. A new television series on Turkey's national television's new streaming service is blatantly [based on the jailed businessman philanthropist](#), Osman Kavala. It shows the lead character as the embodiment of evil doing all the things of which Kavala has been accused despite lack of evidence. Kavala is still contesting his case in the courts, but this does not appear to be a problem in today's Turkey. Political scientist Zafer Yoruk told al Monitor, "The series does not aim to smear the name of Kavala alone but to portray civil movements in Turkey, from the Gezi movement to Saturday mothers who seek justice for their missing relatives, as externally supported acts that are parts of an international conspiracy". Mustafa Burak Doğu, a writer and

producer for the new series, was also a writer for *Diriliş: Ertuğrul*, the hugely popular fictionalised history that romanticised the 13th century origins of the Ottoman empire and helped Erdoğan to portray his rule as a continuation of Ottoman power.

And it seems that Disney has also been persuaded to help boost Turkish nationalist propaganda. A biopic of Atatürk is due to be released on Disney Plus to coincide with the hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Turkish republic in October. The Armenian community has [launched a campaign](#) to attempt to persuade Disney to “step back and reconsider”, and not to be “complicit in perpetuating a distorted and one-sided narrative”. Their model email states: “Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the central figure of this series, is a character who elicits intense controversy and criticism. His actions and the historical context in which he operated cannot be ignored or whitewashed. Yet, it seems that Disney is intent on overlooking the atrocities committed under his command... Artistic freedom should never come at the expense of truth, empathy, and sensitivity. If Disney proceeds with this series without rectifying its course, it risks perpetuating the erasure of the suffering endured by countless individuals. It risks sending a message that the lives and experiences of Armenians and Greeks are inconsequential, disposable even.” Atatürk also set in train Turkey’s attempted erasure of Kurdish identity.

Turkey’s political appropriation of the justice system, which I focussed on last week, continues to produce new atrocities. Among this week’s accounts of the mistreatment of prisoners, we read the [words of the mother of prisoner Besime Duru](#): “27 people are kept in the 12-person dormitory where my daughter is staying. There are children with them. There are 8-hour water cuts. Since the toilet and bathroom are open, it causes odour. This situation leads to psychological and health problems”.

Selman Esmer, who is ill and not getting adequate treatment, expected to be given parole after thirty years in prison, but when he only had thirteen months to wait, he [received a postcard](#) inscribed with the words “Newroz be piroz”. This simple new year message was passed on to him by the prison authorities

– and he now has an extra ten months added to his sentence for “possession of materials”.

Turkey’s political court cases make frequent use of anonymous witnesses. In the latest hearing of the case against nine journalists who were detained last October, the “secret witness” [admitted](#) on questioning that he had acted on behalf of the state, and that a crucial statement was based on hearsay. Such a situation has become unsurprising and is unlikely to affect the outcome of the case.

Last weekend, the demonstration of the Saturday Mothers in Istanbul’s Galatasaray Square, which protests the political murders and disappearances of family members, was again [met with police blockades and detentions](#), as it has done for the last thirteen weeks. Thursday saw a [police raid](#) on the HDP’s Esenyurt District Organisation, and more [house raids and detentions](#) in Cölemler (Hakkâri).

Meanwhile, the Kobanê Case continues to pile one travesty of justice on top of another in a way that would be laughable were it not so serious. 108 members of the HDP are on trial, and 36 of them face the possibility of life imprisonment without parole. HDP co-chair, Mithat Sancar, has [described](#) the 5,000-page prosecution opinion as “a kind of manifesto of the government that reflects its political views and goals”, observing that it is without legal argument. He warned that the case is creating a norm of lawlessness, and regretted the failure of the political opposition to take a strong stand against what is happening.

The main opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, continues to send out mixed messages. On Tuesday, he [defended](#) the journalist Merdan Yanardağ, who was imprisoned for criticising the isolation of Abdullah Öcalan; but he also [appointed as his advisor](#) the former head of the youth movement of the far-right anti-immigrant Victory Party.

Iran

Turkey normalises oppression. Iran also normalises state executions. The Norway-based Iranian Human Rights Organisation [recorded](#) that at least 354 people were executed in the first half of 2023, including at least 77 Kurds and 71 Baluch, over a third more people than in the same period last year. The organisation's director, Amiry-Moghaddam, explains that the Iranian government uses executions to instil fear, and that many of the victims are portrayed as being punished for drug offenses in order to deflect international sympathy. In addition, Hengaw Human Rights Organisation records that [a further twenty detainees lost their lives](#) in prison over the same period, of whom 13 were Kurds and 4 Baluch. At the same time, Iran's international position has been strengthened by the country's acceptance into full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Europe

Despite the dangers faced by activists across the region, European countries continue to extradite Kurds to an uncertain future. This week, Muhiddin Fidan was [nearly deported](#) to Turkey from Germany, where he had lived for 27 years since he was 13. Fidan, who has been awarded only a temporary reprieve, is accused of terrorist activities on the basis of standard cultural and political work at his Kurdish community centre.

And in the UK, journalist organisations are [urging the authorities](#) to reconsider the asylum claim of journalist Ghazi Ghareeb Zorab, and not to send him back to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, where his criticism of both main political parties puts him at risk.

Glimmers of hope

Even in the midst of this minefield, we can still find some cause for hope.

In Istanbul, a presiding judge has had to admit that there is [no case](#) to convict members of Öcalan's legal team for membership of a terrorist organisation.

In Belgium, Comité T has [criticised the terrorist listing of the PKK](#) in their 2023 report. Comité T is a civil society organisation that looks at the impact of anti-terrorist legislation on human rights. They comment that “the Belgian authorities should confine themselves to the legal definition of terrorism in Belgium and not allow themselves to be influenced by pressure from foreign authorities to classify a particular movement as a terrorist organisation”. And they refer to Belgian case law that concluded that the PKK is properly a “belligerent party in an armed conflict” and so subject to international humanitarian law and not anti-terrorist legislation.

And, for anyone tempted to give up, the people now emerging from Turkey’s prisons, who were incarcerated in the 1990s, demonstrate the power of resistance. On his release after 30 ½ years, Yaşar Aslan, [stated](#), “They can take us anywhere they want inside. But still, insiders protect their ideas, their hearts, their minds. Our people need to learn from them. If there is such a resistance between the four walls today, a bigger and better resistance can be made outside.”

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