

“Justified security concerns” about Turkey – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

Anyone who cares about peace, democracy and human rights must worry about Turkey and the threat that the Turkish government poses to prospects of peace in the Middle East and beyond. While Turkey’s NATO allies obediently echo Turkey’s rhetoric about Turkey’s “justified security concerns”, despite the absence of any justification, Turkey daily attacks the security of citizens in Syria, in Iraq, and within its own borders, and attempts to extend this insecurity to other parts of Europe.

As British lawyers denounced Turkish complicity in Yazidi genocide, in a detailed report launched at the House of Lords, Turkey continued their assault on the border areas of northern Syria and Iraq, killing and wounding civilians and forcing the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria to declare a state of emergency and build closer defensive links with Damascus and Iran. And as Turkish planes terrorised villagers still trying to survive and eke out a living in the lands around Manbij and Tal Rifaat, Kurdish dissidents in Sweden and other parts of Europe faced new hostility as a result of Turkish extortion.

Turkish complicity in Yazidi genocide

The United Nations' Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide was written in the aftermath of the Second World War in the hope of making 'never again' a reality. It is now nearly eight years since ISIS began their main attack against the Yazidis in August 2014, when over 5,000 men and older women were killed and over 6,000 women and children were enslaved. The report published this week was compiled by the Yazidi Justice Committee, which was formed by British human-rights lawyers in 2020 to look at evidence against states associated with the genocide with the object of holding them accountable in an international court. For the international statesmen and women lining up to appease their NATO ally, Turkey, it should be essential reading.

There have been a few trials of individual ISIS members, but, as Helena Kennedy QC and Professor David Alton explain in the foreword, "An ocean of impunity exists in relation to the Yazidi genocide. As ISIS is a fictional state, it is deemed in law to be 'a non-state actor' and, therefore, cannot be prosecuted for genocide under current international law... However, there is legal responsibility under the Genocide Convention if a State knowingly fails to prevent genocide, fails to punish perpetrators, or is complicit in genocidal action."

The report pulls together over 200 pages of evidence and makes the case for taking three states to the International Court of Justice: Syria, Iraq and Turkey. While all three are shown to have failed to "take all measures reasonably

available to them to prevent genocide” and also to “legislate for the prosecution of... known perpetrators of the genocide in their territory”, the case against Turkey is even more serious. The report concludes, on the basis of the evidence, that “Turkey, prima facie, was also complicit in the commission of genocide (which is ongoing) by allowing fighters to cross its borders to join ISIS and allowing this group to smuggle oil and other significant resources to fund and fuel its operations and commit prohibited acts against the Yazidis...”

The report also argues that Turkey’s contribution to the Yazidi genocide is far from over. It calls on Turkey to “comply with its obligations under international human rights law, and to immediately cease the unlawful targeting of, and indiscriminate attacks against, civilians and civilian objects, and persons hors de combat, in northern Iraq and northern Syria.” And also to “immediately cease all forceful operations against the Sinjar Resistance Units (‘YBS’) – which are ostensibly characterised as ‘counter-terrorism’ operations... absent strong and cogent evidence indicating an immediate and present risk of armed attack against Turkey or its nationals (which to date has been wholly without basis)”.

This is a report that demands action, but it has not been a good week to get attention in British politics and media for anything outside the soap-opera of Boris Johnson’s resignation. Political action in the UK could depend on Johnson’s replacement as leader of the Conservative Party and consequently, Prime Minister. Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, who has been described as a front runner, is hardly likely to try and hold Turkey to account. In October 2019 he shocked both NATO and the EU by defending the Turkish invasion following Trump’s withdrawal of US troops – and was accused of prioritising a post-Brexit trade deal with Turkey.

North and East Syria under threat

The Conservative government would shed no tears over the demise of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and of its experiment in creating a different form of society based on the ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, but with Turkish aggression left unchecked, that is an all too real possibility.

Turkey is bringing even more troops into the area, and Turkey's mercenary militias are building up their forces too (though the militias have also been attacking each other).

Even without another major invasion, Turkish attacks are intense and fateful and in contravention of the ceasefires they signed in 2019. Last Saturday, a drone targeted and killed SDF commander Mizgin Kobanê, who had first fought in the defence of her home city from which she acquired her nom de guerre. On Sunday, a man was killed by shells while collecting the harvest, and on Monday, two further civilians were killed by Turkish shelling. Another SDF fighter was killed on Thursday.

None of these attacks were stopped by the US or Russia, who are supposed to be guarantors of Turkey's ceasefires; and neither power has given a firm commitment that they will prevent a Turkish invasion. Joe Biden berated Donald Trump for allowing Turkey to invade North and East Syria in 2019, but now that Turkey is using their veto to threaten NATO expansion, Biden is keen to sell them F-16 jets. A delegation from the US-led coalition has been meeting with the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Defence Forces (SDF) in Kobanê and Manbij, but, as noted by Myles Caggin, who was spokesman for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria from August 2019 to September 2020, "the US-led Coalition would not (likely) ever physically confront/impede a Turkish invasion."

In the areas Turkey has said it will attack first – Manbij and Tal Rifaat – it is actually Russia that is in a position to block Turkey's plans. These areas are surrounded by Russian bases, and Russia controls the airspace. Russia backs President Assad, and the SDF has been negotiating with Damascus for a joint defence against any Turkish invasion alongside the state's Syrian Arab Army. These are not easy negotiations because the Administration doesn't want to concede their hard-won autonomy, while Assad and his sponsors know the SDF has few other options. An SDF commander, Dr Hüseyin Koçer, explained to Firat News Agency, "As the SDF, we are ready to defend Syria together with the Damascus administration. We, the peoples of Syria, are brothers and sisters. The forces of the Damascus administration are currently

present in many regions of our country, we exist side by side. The Damascus administration should also respect the Autonomous Administration and the SDF, which represent the will of the peoples in the region. Attacks on Syrian territory will become more intense, and it should recognize this will so that we can defend our lands together. It would be better if an agreement over joint defence between the SDF and the Damascus administration is hammered out.”

On Monday, as large numbers of Russian soldiers arrived in Qamişlo, the SDF announced that they had reached a new military understanding with the Syrian Government the previous night – that hundreds of Syrian Government soldiers had been stationed in key areas, ready to fight alongside military councils, such as that in Manbij, that are affiliated to the SDF, and to supply vital tanks and heavy weapons. On Tuesday, Sharq al-Awsat newspaper gave more details of this initial agreement. They claimed that, in exchange for joint military operations, the Autonomous Administration had agreed to fly the Syrian flag, recognise Assad as head of state, and come under the umbrella of Syrian embassies abroad. They also claimed that this was just the first phase of agreement and that the next would cover oil, energy, agriculture, and animal production.

On Wednesday, the SDF declared a state of emergency and called on “all councils, bodies, committees & institutions to prepare for an emergency situation & to put all capabilities in self-defence projects.”

On Thursday, Rojava Network tweeted that “Pro-Government media reported that an agreement was reached between YPG, Government forces and Pro-Iranian militias to establish a ‘joint operations room’ sponsored by Russia in Tel-Rifaat.” (The YPG – Peoples Protection Units – are part of the SDF.) All this suits Russia, which supports the Syrian regime and would like to see North and East Syria brought back fully under President Assad’s control, but the Syrian forces and pro-Iranian militias may not be enough to help the SDF defeat the second largest army in NATO if Turkey is allowed free reign in the air.

In northern Iraq

Northern Syria makes only a ripple in the Western media, but Turkey's invasion of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is noticed even less – which is why the mention in the Yazidi report is so significant. The Community Peacemaker Teams have recorded that in the month up to 21 June, "Turkish military operations have claimed the lives of 3 children and 2 adult civilians, as well as caused physical harm to 15 civilians in northern Iraq."

On Tuesday, Turkey also carried out another bomb attack on Makhmour Refugee camp – the third attack within six months.

While the PKK continues to make life hard for the Turkish invaders, as they defend their mountain bases, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government, is ready to act as Turkey's vassals. Recent photographs are said to show the KDP's peşmerga forces building a Turkish base.

The Peacemaker Teams also keep account of the human rights abuses carried out by the Kurdistan Regional Government. This week they reported that five activists and journalists who were jailed in a widely criticised trial had not been released although their sentences were meant to have expired. After lengthy negotiations, the government said they would be released after Eid al-Adha.

Sweden and Finland after the memorandum

Meanwhile in Sweden and Finland, the memorandum with Turkey, in which they conceded to clamp down on the Kurds in exchange for Turkey lifting their veto on NATO membership, continues to cause anger and concern. Turkey has made it clear that they are still holding the Nordic countries over a barrel, insisting that they will only ratify their NATO membership if they are satisfied that the agreement has been adhered to – and Turkey's understanding of the agreement is rather different from that of the Nordic politicians, especially when it comes to extradition, which must still comply with human rights law

and be approved by an independent court. Despite Sweden's worrying tendency to work increasingly closely with the Turkish security services in recent years, Turkey will not – and cannot – get all they have asked for. Meanwhile, Kurdish independent MP, Amineh Kakabaveh, has demanding an official investigation into whether the signing of the memorandum has broken the Swedish constitution.

President Erdoğan will, however, be delighted to see how the memorandum has widened the gulf between those who argue that the PKK should not be regarded as a terrorist organisation, and the so-called moderates who do not want to think about what makes people resort to violent resistance and whether this could be justified. The Swedish government says that those who have not carried out terrorist acts have nothing to fear, but who is deciding what counts as terrorism? What forms of resistance will be punished, and how many will feel the need to self-censor so as to avoid stepping over the line? At issue, is not just the defence of Sweden and Finland's Kurds, but also the freedom of expression of both Kurds and others. That is why activists are determined to protest with PKK flags, even while some Kurds, who just want a quiet life, are less than happy at this.

On a more positive note

This week, there was public support for the removal of the PKK from terrorism lists from the Democratic Socialists of America, a nationwide political organisation of over 90,000 members. And last Saturday, the Fusion Festival at Mecklenburg became a sea of yellow, red and green when the crowd at the Mal Élevé concert waved 20,000 flags for Rojava.

Last Sunday, the 5th Congress of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Ankara provided an opportunity for a mass show of resistance – there were tens of thousands of members and activists– and also for a demonstration of international solidarity from over a hundred foreign guests. (Afterwards, predictably, some delegates have been detained for “terror propaganda”.) And the Turkish Journalists Association has acknowledged their sixteen recently-imprisoned Kurdish colleagues by awarding them the Press Freedom Prize.

And finally, in a welcome change of policy, France has repatriated 51 people from the detention camps for ISIS families in North and East Syria – 35 children who are now with welfare services and 16 women who will face trial in France. Over 200 French women and children remain but this is the first time that France has repatriated any adults. Previously they have always argued that ISIS detainees must be tried in Syria although international bodies have done nothing to make this possible. The New York Times points out that such a change, which has been pounced on by the French Far Right, was easier to make after the French elections.

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