

Who will support peace in Turkey and Syria? – last week in Kurdish news

With renewed calls for peace in Turkey and ongoing uncertainties in Syria, what might persuade other countries to help tip the balance towards peace? Can they recognise it as being in their own interests? Sarah Glynn delves deeply into this issue in her weekly review this Sunday.

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Abdullah Öcalan has made a call for peace. The PKK [Kurdistan Workers' Party] [has supported](#) his call. Now all eyes are on Turkey. Turkey has shown no signs of stopping their attacks on the guerrilla areas in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, nor of ending their oppression of opposition politicians or of Kurdish culture. Meanwhile in Syria, where

forces attached to the interim government have perpetrated an ethnic massacre of Alawites as revenge for attacks by fighters loyal to the ousted Assad regime, Turkey still seeks to eliminate the haven of multicultural existence that is the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Turkey's military is still bombing, Turkey's mercenary militias are still fighting, and Turkey is [putting pressure](#) on Ahmed al-Sharaa and his interim government not to make an agreement with the Autonomous Administration's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Instead, the Autonomous Administration is being sidelined for refusing to merge out of existence into al-Sharaa's centralised control. The Kurds and their allies in North and East Syria do not want to lose the freedoms and democratic structures they have developed over the last twelve years, nor to give up their ability to defend themselves in a hostile environment.

International interests

This is a moment when the actions of other countries and international organisations could tip the balance in favour of peace, but what might persuade them to act? We return to that oft-quoted phrase, adapted from Lord Palmerston, that in international relations there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests. What are described as "national interests" are always actually the interests of a nation's élite – though even here interpretation of interests may vary, as Donald Trump is demonstrating. Other countries could help push Turkey in the direction of peace if they perceive this to be in their own interest.

Turkey is not immune to external pressure. Even a bad public image can have wider implications. If governments considered long term interests instead of short-term, political agreements such as EU trading relations could be linked to genuine moves towards peace and democracy. And other countries can help facilitate difficult negotiations.

Peace for the Kurds would impact the whole of Turkey and, in fact, the whole region. It would make the world better for everyone except the arms manufacturers – who are, admittedly, a powerful lobby.

Writing in [Newsweek](#), Amy Austin Holmes – an academic who has also worked at the State Department – reminds readers of Trump's "stated goals of creating lasting peace and stimulating private sector investment in the war-torn Middle East". After observing how both Barak Obama and Joe Biden failed to engage with the Kurds' situation, she gives a short list of steps that the US Administration could take. She calls on Trump and on Secretary of State Marco Rubio to organise the US-led coalition against ISIS to form a peacekeeping force to protect the Syrian-Turkish border and maintain Turkey's 2019 ceasefire agreement, of which America is guarantor; to press Turkey to release Selahattin Demirtaş, the imprisoned former co-chair of the HDP [Peoples' Democratic Party] (predecessor of the current DEM [Equality and Democracy] Party); to appoint an envoy for conflict prevention; and to insist that Damascus includes North and East Syria's SDF in talks about Syria's future.

Currently, there are around 2000 US troops in Syria, where their official purpose is to work with the SDF in the fight against ISIS. Their presence has deterred Turkey from carrying out another invasion into North and East Syria but there have been no decisions made about their future. We also know that the United States has been very active behind the scenes in trying to negotiate an agreement between Damascus and the SDF, which America sees as vital in the continuing fight against ISIS.

The role of the United States is complicated by their desire not to upset Turkey. Turkey's strategic geography and large military play an important part in America's calculations of its own self-interest. The sort of thinking that this produces was exemplified in this week's [hearing](#) by the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, which focused on Turkey.

In nearly two hours of discussion, only one congresswoman raised concerns about Turkey's treatment of the Kurds themselves, as distinct from the Kurds as US allies in the fight against ISIS. Of the three expert witnesses, one was only concerned with beating Russia, and argued that the US should work with Turkey to block Russian influence in Syria and the Black Sea. Another argued that Turkey posed a major danger due to its support for Hamas and other Islamist groups and its attempt to dominate the Eastern Mediterranean. And the third described Turkey as combining "the good, the bad, and the complicated" – with their attacks on the Kurds in northern Syria and Iraq coming under the "complicated" category due to their lack of coordination with "US counter-ISIS missions". Both the first two talked about "great power competition" and argued that the US should retain their forces in Syria. At one point, a Republican representative suggested that America could do a deal whereby they would stop supporting the "PPK/YPG" (stet) "Marxist-Leninist terrorists" and Turkey would stop supporting Hamas, but he was informed that "unfortunately" that was wishful thinking. When we produce arguments based on considerations of humanity, it is useful to remember the reality of the forces we are dealing with.

Media complicity

One of the issues raised in the subcommittee hearing was the low level of Turkish popular support for the United States, which they attributed to Turkey's highly controlled media. Ironically, mainstream Western media also predominantly follows government lines, even without this overt control. When it comes to Turkey that translates into a reluctance to question official Turkish sources, and an acceptance of Turkey's criminalisation of the PKK as a terrorist organisation that bears sole responsibility for all the people who have died during their long war with the Turkish state, even though the majority of these were killed by government forces. We are reminded of this at the end of almost every article that mentions the Kurds.

Even within this uncritical atmosphere, last week's [Financial Times](#) interview with Hakan Fidan, Turkey's spy-chief turned foreign minister, is shocking for its unquestioning pro-Turkey bias. The paper's reputation and influence make this especially concerning. The man who has been central to Turkey becoming a major force for instability and war, is presented as a peacemaker. Do its authors really believe that

Turkey is “stabilising post-Assad Syria”? Do they not think to challenge Turkey’s insistence that the SDF is an extension of the PKK, and the “sworn enemy of Turkey” – or the idea that Turkey could take over and run the ISIS camps and prisons, which would be welcomed by the inmates who believe this would bring freedom to rebuild the Islamic State?

Syrian fractures

The political expulsion of critical faculties seems to have become a bit of a trend when it comes to interviewing leaders from this part of the world. Syria’s new interim leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, has also been given a gentle ride from Westerners anxious to please. He is still being given the benefit of the doubt after this week’s violence, in which the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports [the murder of over a seven hundred Alawite civilians](#) by fighters under overall control of his new Syrian Army. Al-Sharaa was welcomed for removing Assad and has appealed to Western interests by promising adherence to neoliberal economics. His presidency has been internationally acknowledged, but his control over Syria is far from secure. Years of authoritarian control and [corruption](#), war, and international sanctions have distorted and destroyed the economy, making day-to-day existence into a struggle. His own HTS followers will not simply shed their Al-Qaeda ideology, and turning the gangster militias of Turkey’s Syrian National Army (SNA) into a disciplined force is a [gargantuan task](#). There is no system of transitional justice to provide accountability for rights abuses, and the public displays of consultation have lacked real inclusivity and substance. The Autonomous Administration is not the only part of Syria that is resisting Al-Sharaa’s centralisation – though they are much the largest. The southern factions, and the Druze in Suwayda are both holding out against the loss of all local autonomy.

As Turkey looms over the north of Syria, Israel is intervening in the south – taking territory, destroying Syrian military assets, and attempting – largely without success – to woo the Druze and portray themselves as their defenders. Israel wants to see Syria weakened and divided, which may suit Israel’s short-term interests, but opens the whole region to future dangers.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has [responded](#) to this week’s violence in the Alawite region with a call for an end to the escalating attacks and a demand for “real national dialogue” to resolve contradictions and problems and avoid the danger of civil war. They hold out the possibility of a negotiated solution that can accommodate difference – if Turkey can be persuaded to allow them to be heard.

A call for action

Öcalan’s peace call elicited many messages of support, but these need to be converted into actions. In the past, any support for the Kurds or attempt to restrict Turkish aggression has been criticised by Turkey as a threat to their “legitimate security concerns”. The SDF and the many Kurdish political prisoners have never posed a security threat in any case, but the PKK’s acceptance, in principle, of its self-dissolution takes that pretext off the table completely. As Ertuğrul Kürkcü [explains](#), “the PKK bans

of the European Union and the United States will no longer have any effect, because the PKK will no longer exist.”

If other countries are serious about wanting to see peace and prosperity in the Middle East, then they need to make clear that Turkey’s continued aggression is unacceptable. Turkey’s attacks on North and East Syria were always completely unprovoked. Their bombing of the PKK areas in Iraq, which never met legal definitions of self-defence, is now impossible to try and justify. In fact, these can only serve to sabotage peace, as they ensure that the PKK do not have the conditions and security guarantees they need to hold their congress and to negotiate the absorption of their fighters into civil society.

Other countries also need to make clear that Turkey’s growing authoritarianism and crushing of dissent cannot become the norm. This is not helped by the general trend towards authoritarianism, but that does not make Turkish oppression any more acceptable. In fact, every example of oppression in one country makes it easier to impose on others. And, as always, international organisations such as the Council of Europe need to do more to pressure Turkey to conform to commitments on human rights.

And they need to push for what DEM Party co-chair Tülay Hatimoğulları has [described](#) as “the most urgent demand.” She explains, “Mr Öcalan also stated that for this call [for peace and democracy] to be met with a response, he needs to work with his organisation. The most concrete step to take is opening communication channels and ensuring proper working conditions.”

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