

Over 700 detained after Turkish invasion of Iraq targets PKK

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Yesterday, the Turkish Interior Ministry announced that 718 people, including officials and members of the legal Kurdish nationalist Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), have been detained as part of "terror operations" carried out in 40 different cities across the country.

As part of an already advanced drive towards dictatorship that is eliminating basic democratic rights and constitutional guarantees, this state crackdown launched by President Recep Erdo?an's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government is a massive witch-hunt aimed at suppressing any kind of opposition. It is unprecedented in its scope since the NATO-backed attempted military coup in 2016.

These police operations came immediately after Defense Minister Hulusi Akar's announcement Sunday that 13 Turkish nationals, including soldiers and police officers, were killed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the mountainous Gara or Gare region of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) during a recently launched Turkish military invasion. They had reportedly been held as prisoners by the PKK since 2015.

After this announcement, a feverish government and media campaign was unleashed, blaming the HDP for deaths. Meanwhile, the HDP had announced on Saturday that at least 143 of its members had been detained over the past two days.

According to Defense Minister Akar, "It has been established that one of our innocent and unarmed citizens was shot in the shoulder, and the remaining 12 were shot in the head. They were killed in a cave where the Turkish forces arrived to carry out a search."

He also said that the operation, conducted in a 75 kilometers-wide and 25 kilometers-deep area in Iraq, had been successfully concluded. "With the operation, all the elements that had been settled in this area and were preparing to attack our borders, security forces and people have almost been eliminated," he said. Three Turkish soldiers and 48 PKK militia members lost their lives in the military clash, according to Akar.

The Defense Ministry had announced last Wednesday that it had launched a new military invasion dubbed Operation Eagle Claw 2 into northern Iraq targeting PKK forces on the ground, claiming that there was a growing threat against Turkey from a PKK presence in the area. Dozens of warplanes and drones were used in the military operation, along with ground forces deployed to the area by helicopter.

The ministry announced on Friday that the operation was

conducted "in coordination with friends and allies," likely referring to the KRG and the central Iraqi government. Top Turkish military officials, including Akar and Chief of the General Staff Ya?ar Güler, have recently conducted several discussions with their counterparts in Erbil and Baghdad. Ankara had launched two other military invasions into the area to drive out PKK forces last July, involving Turkish air and ground forces.

On the other hand, the PKK claimed in a statement cited by the ANF News that the 13 Turkish nationals were killed by Turkish air strikes that hit a camp where prisoners were held in Gara, stating that, "The bombardment, which lasted for three days, and the fierce battles inside and outside the camp resulted in the death of some of the MIT [Turkish intelligence] members, soldiers and policemen we had captured."

Both HDP and the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) deputies have raised their long-standing efforts to release these prisoners, and accused the Erdo?an government of rejecting these initiatives.

HDP deputy Ömer Faruk Gergerlio?lu tweeted on Sunday: "The relatives of the soldiers held hostage by the PKK applied to me 2.5 years ago... I could have done anything for peace and life, but the state officials had never thought of something like that, they did not take a step."

Another HDP deputy, Hüda Kaya, also asserted that, "The Republic of Turkey bombed the hostage camp and they stopped when they understood that they had died. Those who said 'Yes' to war motions are now lamenting." That was a reference to the CHP, the HDP's electoral ally, which has always supported motions in favor of cross-border military operations in the Parliament. After these statements were posted on social media, the Prosecutor's Office in Ankara launched an investigation against these deputies on charges of "propagandizing for a terrorist organization."

Murat Bakan, a CHP deputy, has also revealed that he had submitted six parliamentary questions for years; all but one of them remained unanswered. He asked the government, "Why did you not do anything for years, give an accounting for that ... I have been struggling for years for them to return to their homeland, their homes and reunite with their families."

However, top Turkish officials have seized on the deaths of the 13 Turkish nationals as an opportunity to wage a further attack on democratic rights, and divert outward the growing social opposition within the population to the government's homicidal response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interior Minister Süleyman Soyulu clearly accused the HDP and all those questioning who was to blame for the deaths of “trying to acquit” the PKK, writing that, “If we could not catch Murat Karay?lan [a PKK leader] and cut him into a thousand pieces, this Nation and our Martyrs should spit in our faces.”

With this statement, which could only come from a fascistic government, a minister has openly rejected the right of due process for a potential defendant, and called instead for his brutal extrajudicial murder.

Erdo?an’s political ally and the leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), Devlet Bahçeli, has also stated that, “Nothing will be the same as before after this. Everyone should pick their side. Either treason or guidance. Either damnation or the people.”

These statements and subsequent police operations must be taken as a stark warning to the working class and those who defend democratic rights. As part of the drive towards authoritarianism by ruling classes globally, the Turkish government has a very clear agenda against the coming struggles of workers amid the deepening economic and social crises that have been accelerated by the pandemic. Only a few weeks ago, there were mass student protests against an anti-democratic move by the government, gaining wide support within the population.

However, the Erdo?an government and its far-right ally are also concerned over a growing challenge by a potential electoral alliance including not only the CHP and HDP, but also the far-right Good Party, and two AKP split-offs, the Future Party of former AKP Prime Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu and the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA) of former AKP Economy Minister Ali Babacan. Several recent polls indicate that such an alliance could defeat the AKP-MHP alliance if elections were held today.

This attempt to cobble together a pro-imperialist opposition alliance underscores that both the HDP and CHP are right-wing bourgeois parties, unwilling and incapable of defending democratic rights. Their potential alliance is based only on the interests of the Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisie, and oriented to the NATO imperialist powers.

The Turkish government’s cross-border military operations and police crackdown against the Kurdish nationalist parties inside the country are also bound up with conflicts between Ankara and its NATO imperialist allies, in particular Washington, over the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara regularly denounces the US-backed Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria as a terrorist group, indistinguishable from the PKK. It views any enclave in Syria controlled by the YPG as a threat to Turkey’s territorial integrity. In furtherance of this policy, it has carried out many military invasions into Syria targeting the YPG over past five years.

After the US State Department issued a statement hinting suspicions over the deaths of the 13 Turkish nationals, a conflict erupted between Ankara and Washington. Washington stated, “If reports of the death of Turkish civilians at the hands of the PKK, a designated terrorist organization, are confirmed, we condemn this action in the strongest possible terms.”

President Erdo?an responded with an angry attack on the US, despite Ankara’s recent attempts to improve strained ties with

Washington after the election of Joe Biden as president. He said yesterday, “Now there is a statement made by the United States. It’s a joke. Were you not supposed to stand against the PKK, the YPG? You clearly support them and stand behind them.”

He added that “If we are together with you in NATO, if we are to continue our unity, then you will act sincerely towards us. Then, you will stand with us, not with the terrorists.”

The Turkish Foreign Ministry summoned the US ambassador to Turkey, David M. Satterfield, to deliver Ankara’s criticism of the US statement “in the strongest terms possible.”

There was a phone call between Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuo?lu and his American counterpart, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, for the first time since Biden’s inauguration. Blinken tweeted afterwards that he spoke with Çavuo?lu about the “longstanding importance of the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship. I look forward to continued cooperation in Syria, counterterrorism, and de-escalation efforts in the Eastern Mediterranean.”

Turkish presidential spokesman ?brahim Kal?n recently emphasized Ankara’s willingness to improve relations with Washington, but also spelled out three major points of conflict: “The S-400 issue [the air defense system bought from Russia] and the implementation of CAATSA sanctions in connection with it and removing Turkey from the F-35 program. Secondly, the support the US has given to the PYD/YPG since the Obama era. Third, the FETO structure [US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen blamed by Ankara for the 2016 coup attempt] still continues its activities against Turkey freely in the US.”

However, in addition to these ongoing conflicts, the US position under the Biden administration on Kurdish forces and the “keep the oil” policy in Syria introduced by former President Trump seems not to have changed as Ankara demands. The Syrian state news agency SANA reported on Sunday that “US occupation forces brought in a convoy of vehicles carrying logistic support and weapons to their base in the al-Omar oil field in Deir Ezzor eastern countryside in a step to boost their occupation in the area,” an area controlled jointly by the US military and YPG forces.

As a clear signal of Ankara’s intention to revive the regime change war in Syria launched nearly ten years ago, Kal?n also said in the same interview that, “We cannot agree on the PYD in Syria, but let me say that we have much common ground [with the US] regarding the future of the Assad regime.”



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