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TURKEY:

THE TURKISH PRESIDENT HAS ISTANBUL ELECTION RESULT CANCELLED, BUT MUST GIVE IN TO HUNGER STRIKERS

This month began with the repression of the May 1st demonstrations: 119 people who tried to march in Taksim (Istanbul) were detained. Then on the 3rd, it was the 26th "World Press Freedom Day". When the Turkish Constitutional Court announced, after 2 years, that it would examine on that date the appeals submitted by 9 journalists in the name of non-compliance with

fundamental freedoms, this choice raised some hope. He was quickly disappointed, as all appeals were dismissed. *Arab Weekly* recalled the 5 how 92% of Turkish media are now directly controlled by the President Erdoğan, while a new Communications Directorate, located directly in his palace, intervenes in almost all pro-government media... Citizens seeking objective information look at sites created by

Turkish journalists in exile like *Ahval*, or foreign channels in Turkish like the BBC or *Deutsche Welle*... In its 2019 report published precisely on 3 September (<https://tgs.org.tr/basin-ozgurlugu-raporu-nisan-2018-nisan-2019/>), the Turkish Union of Journalists notes the following facts: from April 2018 to April 2019, 74 journalists received a total of 256 years' imprisonment, including 3

years for life; the total fines or compensation imposed reached 170 million lire (\$28.4 million); 4 out of 5 journalists tried were convicted; during the last 3 years, 1.954 press cards were cancelled: one in four journalists is now unemployed. On the same day, the “Mesopotamia Platform of Women Journalists” (MKGP, *Mezopotamya kadın gazeteciler platformu*) presented its own report covering the last 4 months in Diyarbakir (*Bianet*). Published in Turkish and Kurdish, it mentions 12 journalists imprisoned on hunger strike, 14 women journalists imprisoned, 30 on trial, 2 acquitted, 2 beaten and... 2 murdered. On this World Day, *Amnesty International's* Turkish branch asked journalists to describe their situation. The contributions, some sent from prison, were published (in Turkish) on the Internet (<https://amnesty.org.tr/icerik/tutu-klu-gazeteciler-yazdi>).

In addition, political events were dominated by the results of the March 31 municipal elections, in which voters in the major Western cities sanctioned power for the economic crisis, while in the East, Kurdish voters rejected the “administrators” (*kayyum*) appointed by Ankara to elect candidates from the HDP (Democratic Peoples’ Party, progressive and “pro-Kurdish”). A decidedly bad loser, Mr. Erdoğan led the forcing throughout April to obtain from the YSK (High Electoral Commission) the cancellation of the Istanbul result. He finally obtained it on May 6 with an “extraordinary objection” from the AKP based on the fact that some assessors of the counting of the votes were not civil servants... The next day, the Ministry of the Interior appointed the interim mayor, while the CHP candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, announced that he would not give in and gave his voters an appointment on June 23, the date of the new vote. After İmamoğlu declared in a meeting “Everything will be fine” (*Hersey*

güzel olacak), the government banned on the 13th a banner bearing these words during the parade commemorating the Manisa mining disaster which killed 301 people in 2014... Several opposition parties announced their support to İmamoğlu; the Communist Party withdrew its candidate. The HDP announced that again it would not present a candidate. On 28 June, HDP Co-Chair Pervin Buldan said: “The June 23rd elections are also those of Şırnak, Muş, Bitlis and Bağlar. It was the elections of our six municipalities that were seized”. The CHP, for its part, tried to attract Kurdish voters by mentioning the “fundamental right” to education in its mother tongue...

The prospect is not in favour of the AKP, the economic situation being particularly bad in this city which generates 31% of Turkish GDP. As of May 31, the consumer confidence index was down 13% from the previous month, and statistics show that when this index falls, so too does the pro-AKP vote... It seems that in response, the authorities are trying to manipulate the voters list, while it should remain the same as on March 31: *Cumhuriyet* reports that some voters have noticed that they have been removed and replaced (at the same address!) by complete strangers (*Al-Monitor*)...

The so-called independent YSK, who only cancelled the result of the CHP, while conditions were the same in the other districts, publicly revealed himself as ordered by the Turkish President. Even former AKP leaders Abdullah Gül and Ahmet Davutoğlu reacted negatively (*Bianet*). The HDP candidate for Ankara, Filiz Keresecioğlu, said: “Now Turkey sees that what has been done in the Kurdish provinces can also be done in Istanbul and the West”: the YSK has also declared several new HDP mayors ineligible, on the pretext that they were dismissed in 2016 by emergency decrees from Mr Erdoğan. However,

he had validated in writing the submission of their candidacy... Thus at Bağlar (Diyarbakir), Zeyyat Ceylan, winner with 70.34% of the votes, had to leave the mayor’s office to the AKP candidate (25.46%), as well as to the elected HDP of Tusba in Van (52.93%), the election of Caldiran, also in Van (53%), or Tekman (Erzurum)... The YSK also invalidated the election of 10 *moukhtars* (village or district chiefs) from Lice district (Diyarbakir), replaced by appointed administrators (*Ahval*)...

The “guerrilla” of the power against the HDP municipalities was not limited to the invalidation of elected officials. Already last month, AKP administrators had handed over municipal buildings to the police or the provincial administration before leaving their post. On 8 May, the *Bianet* website announced that in the districts of Cizre, İdil and Sılopi (Şırnak), taken over by the HDP, the police had set up checkpoints with X-ray equipment or even guard posts in front of the town halls, as well as in Kiziltepe (Mardin), in front of the metropolitan town hall of Mardin, and according to *RojInfo* in 26 municipalities. Reason given by the authorities for these illegal acts of intimidation, because without a written order: to prevent people deprived of public office by decree-law “to interfere in the administration of municipalities” (*RojInfo*)... The municipality of Tunceli, conquered on 31 March by the country’s only communist mayor, Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu, has also attracted the wrath of ultranationalists: at its first session on 23rd, its municipal council decided to change the name on the town hall by re-establishing its Kurdish name of “Dersim», authoritatively changed in 1935, and to offer its citizens services in Zazakî and Kurmancî (*Bianet*). MHP leader Devlet Bahçeli stigmatized a “communist and separatist plot”, and the Interior Ministry sent an inspector to the area (*Ahval*).

In addition, during the week of the 13th, the Turkish Presidency lodged no fewer than 33 complaints against 21 Kurdish MPs (and 1 from the CHP opposition) to deprive them of their immunity and allow them to be convicted or dismissed. According to Turkish state media, among the targeted MPs are the two HDP co-chairs Pervin Buldan and Sezai Temelli, Leyla Güven (Diyarbakir), initiator of hunger strikes, and Ahmet Şık (Istanbul), a former journalist known for his investigations into the Gülen network (such as his book *İmamın Ordusu*, "The Imam's Army") and the administration Erdoğan (Kurdistan 24).

Another significant event this month was the success of the hunger strike movement calling for an end to the isolation of the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. The electoral tremor of 31 March and the concern of the authorities in front of thousands of prisoners fasting (7,000 to 6 May according to *Humanity*), 8 of whom had already committed suicide, probably both influenced the decision to lift the isolation, taken on 16. On the 2nd, the day when the police violently dispersed in Diyarbakir a gathering of mothers and wives of prisoners on hunger strike (AFP), arresting in several cities about forty relatives, Öcalan's lawyers were able to meet him (after 8 years and 810 rejected requests!). Fearing a manoeuvre to stop the movement, the prisoners announced that they would continue it; the fasting people of Strasbourg declared in particular: "We will not stop until the isolation is over. The visit took place, but the important thing is the next step" (*RojInfo*). The HDP called on the international community to break its silence, as 15 prisoners had begun a "fast to death". On the 14th, there were 30 of them.

On the 16th, Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül announced the lifting of isolation. Öcalan's lawyers had relayed a letter on the 6th at a

press conference in which their client called on fasters not to endanger their lives, stating also that "problems in Syria must be solved far from the culture of violence and with the aim of establishing local democracy while respecting Syria's territorial integrity". Extended hand? Öcalan added: "Turkey's sensitivities must be taken into account"... On the 20th, the police violently repressed again outside the Gebze women's prison a rally organised by mothers of political prisoners; several demonstrators were injured, the 2 local HDP representatives arrested, and the HDP deputy Ayşe Sürücü was beaten (*RojInfo*). On 22nd, two of Öcalan's lawyers, after several rejected applications, were able to visit him again. On the 26th, after they had relayed a new message from Öcalan calling for the end of the movement, whose "objective[...] has been achieved", the representative of fasting prisoners, Deniz Kaya, announced the end of the movement, quickly followed by the initiator of the movement, Leyla Güven, who welcomed "a victory of Turkish democracy", while regretting the death of the 8 suicide prisoners.

This victory should not make us forget how worrying the prison situation in Turkey remains. According to an April 2019 report by the Human Rights Association (İHD), torture or ill-treatment in prison has increased sharply in recent years: 1,149 complainants have reported having suffered torture or ill-treatment, and at least 23 prisoners have experienced suspicious deaths. On 7 July, Van HDP MP Tayip Menzel tabled a written question in parliament on the systematic use of torture in prison No. 2 at Elaziğ, pointing out that despite several complaints from prisoners, no investigation had been opened. On 23 August, after the *Turkey's Center for Prison Studies* (TCPS, Turkish acronym CISST) announced the publication on the Internet in English and Turkish of a report entitled *Freedom of Speech in*

Prison (*Hapishaneler'de ifade özgürlüğü*), the organization's website appears to have been immediately closed (links indicated: http://www.tcps.org.tr/sites/default/files/kitaplar/freedom_of_speech_in_prison_report.pdf and http://www.tcps.org.tr/sites/default/files/kitaplar/hapishanelerde_ifade_ozgurlugu_internet.pdf)

At the same time, the well-established repressive mechanism of arrests, charges and convictions continues to function. After academics signed the petition against violence in the Kurdish provinces "We will not be party to this crime", the (dismissed) members of the Governing Council of the Turkish Medical Association (TTB) who had criticised the Afrîn operation were sentenced on the 3rd to prison terms (*Bianet*).

On the 7th, the sentence imposed on journalist Pelin Ünker of *Cumhuriyet* was overturned on appeal. She had been sentenced to more than a year in prison for defamation after a report on the *Paradise Papers* involving Binali Yıldırım and his sons, who had admitted the facts! On 8 August, journalist Cansu Pişkin, of the daily newspaper *Evrensel*, was sentenced to 10 months' suspended sentence for publishing the name of the prosecutor of the university students' case Boğaziçi, who were tried for protesting against the Turkish attack on Afrîn. His lawyers said that the publication of the magistrate's name in pro-government media such as *Sabah* had not triggered any prosecutions...

On the 10th, the Constitutional Court ordered the release of the teacher Ayşe Çelik for "violation of her freedom of expression". Çelik had been convicted of "terrorist propaganda" after calling a live television programme to report child deaths caused by military operations in the country's Kurdish provinces. One of its lawyers, Mahsuni Kahraman, said

he hoped that this verdict would set a precedent in the cases of academics and doctors convicted of their statements (*Bianet*). On the 14th, a delegation of doctors went to the Ministry of Justice to present a petition calling for the release of the TTB leaders.

The prosecution of the approximately 2,000 signatories of the petition “We will not be party to this crime” has increased, also targeting people residing abroad, such as mathematician Tuna Altinel, a professor in France at the University of Lyon 2, arrested on 11 November during a visit to Balıkesir for “terrorist propaganda”. His arrest triggered a major solidarity movement in France. On the 21st, Ayşe Gül Altınay, a signatory to the same petition, was sentenced for “terrorist propaganda” to 2 years and one month’s imprisonment (a sentence of more than 2 years prohibits conditional sentences). Teacher at Sabanci University, anthropologist, Altınay had co-signed in 2011 with Fethiye Cetin the *Book of Little Children (Torunlar)*, which gathers testimonies of descendants of Armenians victims of the 1915 genocide. *Bianet* has published her moving statement of defence online

(<https://bianet.org/english/freedom-of-expression/208723-statement-of-academic-ayse-gul-altinay>). On the same day, 7 journalists of the “pro-Kurdish” *Özgür Gündem* newspaper, closed by decree in 2016, including its editors Eren Keskin and Huseyin Aykol, were sentenced on the same charges to prison terms ranging from 15 to 45 months (*AFP*).

On the 15th, the judgment concerning the revelation of the clandestine convoy of weapons to Syria by the Turkish intelligence services (MIT) was finally handed down. In this case, the Turkish President had personally lodged a complaint and requested, in par-

ticular, life imprisonment for *Cumhuriyet*’s editor-in-chief, Can Dündar. In February, the Constitutional Court ruled that the imprisonment of Dündar and the head of the newspaper in Ankara, Erdem Gül, was a violation of their rights, a decision that angered Erdoğan... The Istanbul court this time acquitted Gül and dropped the charges against CHP deputy and journalist Enis Berberoğlu. At the trial held last February, their cases were separated from Dündar’s, whose extradition is now awaited by the court to continue the trial....

From the 20th, another case of police abuse made headlines, that of the village of Halfeti (Şanlıurfa). That evening, HDP MP and human rights defender Ömer Faruk Gergerlioğlu posted a photo on Twitter showing a dozen people handcuffed behind their backs and lying on the ground. Then details gradually emerged. After an anti-PKK operation in the Dergili district on 18 December, during which a police officer was killed and two others wounded, the security forces retaliated against the village, placing 53 people in police custody for questioning and torturing some with electricity, including children, to extract confessions... The detained persons were illegally denied access to a lawyer. On the 20th, a military helicopter bombed the area almost all afternoon. The Şanlıurfa branch of the Human Rights Association İHD accused the police of torture and ill-treatment, which the city prosecutor denied. On 24 July, *Amnesty International* launched a campaign denouncing the risk of torture of detainees and calling on its members to write to the Turkish Minister of the Interior (https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4404402019_FRENCH.pdf).

On the international scene, rela-

tions with the United States continue to expand. On the 4th, Secretary of Defence Patrick Shanahan threatened to exclude Turkey from the F-35 military aircraft production program if the country persists in its desire to acquire the Russian S-400 air defence system. Ankara, which has invested more than \$1 billion in this program, is expected to receive about 100 devices. On the 24th, the American channel CNBC even announced that the United States had threatened Turkey with sanctions...

The Turkish army has further intensified its anti-PKK operations in Iraqi Kurdistan. The PKK claimed earlier this month the death of 6 Turkish soldiers the previous week, while the Turkish Ministry of Defence announced that it had “neutralized” 14 Kurdish fighters in an air strike on a cave north of Dohuk, which the PKK denied. On the 2nd, other strikes damaged without killing several villages in the Qandîl area. On the 3rd, the Turkish Ministry of Defence announced the death of 3 soldiers in Iraqi Kurdistan in mortar fire at their base in Sherwan Mazin, opposite the Turkish province of Hakkari. In retaliation, helicopters pounded several villages the next evening, terrifying the inhabitants (*Rûdaw*). On the 6th and 7th, planes also bombed the district of Amêdî (Dohouk), not far from Shiladze. On the morning of the 10th, one Turkish soldier was killed and another wounded by an improvised explosive device in Dilucu (Iğdır), near the Iranian border (*Rûdaw*). On 11 March, Rıza Altun, a PKK leader who had been announced by the Turkish army (just before the elections...) to have been wounded in a strike on 21 March, denied the information. On the 14th, a sergeant was killed in Derecik (Hakkari), causing a retaliatory strike on the

Iraqi side, and a Kurdish civilian who went out to collect mushrooms was killed.

On the 15th, a Turkish military drone crashed on the Iraqi side near Sarsing (Dohuk), shot down or because of technical problems (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 13th, the PKK claimed to have killed 3 soldiers and wounded “many others” at Şırnak (*Roj News*). The ANF agency also announced “many deaths” in Cukurca (Hakkari). The Turkish army has announced the elimination of 4 Kurdish fighters in Dersim and 4 others in Hakkari. On the 16th, 5 MIT agents were wounded in Sarsing (Amêdî), Kurdistan, Iraq, when their convoy was hit by an improvised explosive device (*NRT*). On the 19th, *RojInfo* reported that another similar explosion killed 9 Turkish soldiers and wounded 21 others, again in Amêdî. Other clashes involving helicopters lasted almost a week in Sidakan. The

PKK reported having “attacked the Turkish invading army” early in the morning near Khwakurk (*Rûdaw*). On the 21st, further air strikes killed a civilian near Barzan.

On the 28th, the *Anatolia* Agency announced the launch the previous evening in Iraqi Kurdistan of a major anti-PKK offensive in Khwakurk (northern Erbil province). Under the personal supervision of Defence Minister Hulusi Akar, the operation, called “Claw”, started with heavy artillery shelling, also involving commandos and 10 fighter planes, as well as at least 30 *Cobra* helicopters. According to the mayor of Sidakan (Soran), the strikes were heard from the cities of Soran and Rawandouz, whose inhabitants were terrorized. The operation was widely covered by the media, with the Turkish President himself mentioning it in a tweet. The HPG (PKK military wing) denounced

Turkish propaganda and claimed 5 dead and “many wounded” in the attack on a military convoy in Basan (Iğdır). On the morning of the 29th, Turkish fighters carried out, for the second time in the week, strikes near Shiladze (Dohuk), an event that has become more and more frequent in recent weeks. On the 31st, the HPG announced that on the 29th it had repelled the Turkish invading army, inflicting a “historic blow” and killing 9 soldiers, at the cost of 3 of its own fighters killed in air strikes (*RojInfo*).

These military operations seem to have a mainly domestic propaganda function. As the *Ahval* site noted in April, if they are so effective, how can it be explained that the Turkish army, the 2nd largest in NATO, has not yet been able to put an end to a guerrilla war that has been going on for decades, nor to take control of its opponent’s mountain sanctuary?

ROJAVA: DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE AUTONOMOUS ADMINISTRATION, ISIS DORMANT CELLS

According to *Al-Monitor*, indirect negotiations have reportedly begun between the Turkish Secret Service (MIT) and the PYD, the Kurdish party in Syria dominating the autonomous administration of North Syria. On 6 April, the online newspaper reported reports from an anonymous source that MIT envoys had met Mazloum Kobanê, the Syrian democratic forces (SDF) commander-in-chief, twice in late April. The United States reportedly served as intermediaries to start these discussions, which Kobanê mentioned in early May, describing them as “indirect”, conducted “through intermediaries”. In any case, a “deal” is far from certain: Turkey is still seeking control of a “security zone” established in the

Syrian North (so far without having obtained anything concrete from the United States on this subject, it seems), a control that has been absolutely refused by the autonomous administration, and Kobanê insisted on his side that any agreement first implies a Turkish withdrawal from Afrîn, a path that Turkey hardly seems to take...

On the contrary, the jihadist mercenaries of Turkey controlling the region and the city of Afrîn continue their abuses, which are clearly aimed at frightening the Kurdish populations in order to drive them away and carry out the ethnic cleansing desired by Mr. Erdoğan. On the afternoon of 29 May, they surrounded and attacked 2 villages in Mabata district, Kokan High and

Low, threatening to kill the inhabitants if they did not leave their homes, firing on those who resisted or refused to leave, injuring 10 people, among them women and children, including 2 seriously. The next day, hundreds of Kurds from Syria took to the streets to protest against the Turks’ plans to build an insulating wall Afrîn from the rest of Syria. Sinem Mohammed, representative in the United States of the Syrian Democratic Council, expressed her concern that this operation would prepare for the annexation of Afrîn by Turkey (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 5th, another demonstration gathering several thousand participants took place in Kobanê to denounce both the silence of the international community regarding the Turkish exactions in Afrîn and the isolation

imposed by Turkey on the imprisoned Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan (*RojInfo*).

Further east, and particularly in the Deir Ezzor region, the autonomous administration of the Syrian Northern Federation has been confronted for three weeks with a series of demonstrations by Arab residents who complain about the lack of basic services and accuse the leaders, mainly Kurdish, of discrimination against them. These protests have gradually spread to oil-rich areas, where some residents have tried to stop convoys carrying oil to Damascus-held territories, complaining about the lack of local profits. In some villages, banners described the SDF and the Syrian President as “accomplices to the same crime”. Another criticism is the recent increase in insecurity.

But one of the most important points of friction remains conscription, particularly at Raqqa. The incorporation campaign, which targets all ethnic groups, Kurds and Arabs alike, follows a decision taken on the 14th by the Defense Committee for Recruitment in the Euphrates Region to call on all young people between the ages of 18 and 28 to complete an 18-month “self-defense period”. On the 18th, the SDF military police arrested about 20 young people from several villages who refused to be drafted and sent them to training camps, many of whom are deserting, according to an anonymous source from Raqqa. Some of these young people belong to poor families who need their labour force, others join the SDF for the salary of 200 dollars a month (*Al-Monitor*).

In an attempt to reduce tensions, and as some tribal Arab leaders from northern and eastern Syria began to discuss with Damascus, the autonomous administration began discussions with them (*Reuters*). Aware that, now that the ISIS threat is diminishing, the former allies are

likely to move away, the Rojava authorities organised a “Kurdo-Arab” forum on 3 May in Ain al-Issa, near Raqqa, to which 5,000 participants, members and leaders of these same tribes were invited. The meeting brought together representatives of some 70 clans, and ended with a declaration defending the unity of Syria and the sovereignty of its people, and calling for an end to the Turkish occupation of the Jerablous, Azaz, al-Bab and Idlib regions and the liberation from the same occupation of the Afrîn region and the return of its original inhabitants. The autonomous administration has stated that it is ready to engage in dialogue with the regime, but has once again rejected the so-called “reconciliation” agreements promoted by the regime, accusing them of being nothing more than unconditional surrenders accompanied by the evacuation of combatants (*AFP*).

After the forum, the Russian Foreign Minister accused the US and the autonomous administration of seeking to establish a “quasi-state» in the eastern Euphrates, and Damascus described the forum as “treason”, while the Syrian Deputy Foreign Minister said that the Kurds were only a “tool in Washington’s hands”. The Syrian Democratic Council reacted on the 5th by stating in a statement that Damascus had no right to accuse anyone of treason or to claim to defend the unity and sovereignty of the country after allowing Turkey to occupy Jerablous, Azaz, al-Bab, Afrîn, and parts of Idlib province... (*Rûdaw*)

On the 14th, the administration of the Syrian North accused the Damascus regime of inciting demonstrations, while the pro-regime media, on the other hand, affected defending the demonstrators. The regime’s animosity, which has engaged with the support of its Russian ally in an offensive to retake Idlib province, may well be linked to its oil supply difficulties, the worst since the beginning of the war.

While 75% come from outside Iran, Iran has stopped its deliveries since the return of US sanctions, and local oil fields are under the control of the autonomous administration... (*AP*)

On the other front, on the Turkish side, the situation is becoming more and more tense. On the 4th, the Turkish Ministry of Defence announced that a lieutenant had been killed and another soldier wounded in a YPG attack near Tell Rifaat, a town east of Afrîn and south of Azaz trapped between Turks in the north and regime in the south (*Reuters*). Further south, in Idlib, Syrian army fire on a Turkish outpost wounded 2 soldiers, causing 3 helicopters and a plane (*Bloomberg*) to be sent. Later that same day, the Ministry announced that it had launched a retaliatory attack on several villages in the Tell Rifaat area and had “neutralized” 28 militants. The Syrian “National Army” (despite its name a pure Turkish creation), also announced an attack, but according to *Reuters* had to withdraw from the 3 villages it had taken due to heavy fire from the Syrian army.

On the 10th, further jihadist fire targeted the SDF in the same area, and on the 12th, a Kurdish farmer injured in his field by Turkish fire had to be hospitalized in Girê Spî (Tell Abyad). In Afrîn, the Turkish army and two jihadist factions bombed Shera district with heavy artillery (*WKI*). On 15 December, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (OSDH) announced that more than 600 Kurdish prisoners arrested in Afrîn after the Turkish invasion, and transferred since then to Azaz, had been displaced again over the past week. The OSDH reported that it had received reports that some of them had been sent to Turkish prisons, and also reported that a number of them had been tortured. According to the OSDH, 2,682 people have so far been arrested in Afrîn, including 1,087 still in prison, the others

having been released, most often for ransoms ranging from a few hundred to 100,000 dollars (*Ahval*). On the 18th, Tell Rifaat was again targeted by Turkish fire, while rebel fighting between Turkey and YPG north of Aleppo was reported. Thousands of Kurds gathered outside a Russian centre in Aleppo to denounce Russian complicity in the Turkish bombing of Tell Rifaat. They have good reason to be suspicious: earlier this month, Turkish Vice-President Fuat Oktay announced a joint Turkish-Russian military deployment agreement at the border in the region. Even if Turkey regularly makes announcements that subsequently turn out to be devoid of any reality, it is a worrying reminder of Russia's agreement in early 2018 for the Turkish invasion of Afrin...

On the American side, it seems that, in contradiction with President Trump's initial announcement of withdrawal, Washington is preparing to leave a thousand men behind, partly because the Turkish President has refused to give assurances that he will not attack the SDF, partly because American experts estimate that there are still nearly 20,000 ISIS fighters in the world, including many members of sleeping cells in Syria. And they seem more and more active. On May 1st, one of the commanders of the *Jaysh al-Thuwar*, a faction allied to the SDF, escaped

an attack in the streets of Manbij using an improvised explosive device that wounded two civilians, an attack confirmed by the OSDH and then claimed by ISIS (*Hawar, Kurdistan* 24). On the 8th, a bomb exploded in Raqqa without causing any casualties. On the 10th, two explosions, one using a motorcycle bomb, the other near a checkpoint, killed 5 civilians in Manbij (*WKI*). On the 11th, the OSDH reported the deaths of 3 SDF members in Girê Spî (Tell Abyad), while a car bomb killed 1 person and injured 6, including a child, in Manbij (*Hawar*). On the evening of the 15th, a suicide attack targeted a SDF demining convoy in southern Hassakeh province without casualties.

Worryingly, some attacks, particularly in Deir Ezzor province, have taken place in areas supposedly cleared of jihadists long ago, far behind SDF lines, which presupposes local complicity. A recent Pentagon report (<https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/07/2002128675/-1/-1/1/LIG%20OCO%20OIR%20Q2%20OIR%20Q2%20MARCH2019.PDF>) highlights the persistence of the threat, particularly in areas where the population is predominantly Arab and where some tribal ties may still exist with ISIS...

After launching a major offensive on the 15th mobilizing 5,000 fight-

ers in Deir Ezzor province, the SDF announced the seizure of weapons and ammunition, the dismantling of a sleeper cell in Tabqa, and the arrest of 42 jihadists in recently released areas. On the evening of the 18th, a bomb exploded in front of the Manbij Security Office, killing 10 people, including civilians and 3 children. Two other explosions near stores also caused material damage on the 21st (*WKI*).

At the end of the month, the SDF was also able to send back 2 young Yezidi girls freed from ISIS to join their community in Shingal (Sinjar). At the beginning of the month, a group of 27 yezidis, 14 women and 13 children, released during the battle for Baghouz, had already been driven back to Iraq. But the fate of hundreds of yezidis remains unknown (*WKI*).

On the 30th, *Deutsche Welle*, quoting *Spiegel* magazine, announced that the German government had held discussions with the United States on a possible air deployment to protect a security zone in northern Syria "from both Turkey and the Assad regime"... This would prevent any deployment of German troops on the ground. But German political parties disagree on this point: while the CDU has indicated its support, the SPD has expressed strong opposition to this idea (*Ahval, Al-Masdar*).

IRAQI KURDISTAN:

NECHIRVAN BARZANI ELECTED PRESIDENT; DESPITE BETTER RELATIONS WITH BAGHDAD, ARABIZATION GOES ON IN KIRKUK



lthough deep differences still remain between the Kurdistan Region and the federal government, relations are gradually fading. On 3 March, Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi, visiting Paris, welcomed this in his joint press conference with the French President, stating that problems concerning oil, Sinjar and border cross-

ings could be resolved through dialogue. In particular, he insisted on the unification of customs procedures, which made it possible to eliminate internal control points between Kurdistan and the rest of the country (*Kurdistan* 24). Another example of the improvement is that on the 21st, Iraqi peshmergas and soldiers reopened by mutual agreement the last closed road between

Kurdistan and the federal territory, the one from Zummar to Dohuk (the Sihela-Sindjar and Kirkuk-Erbil roads were already reopened). This is a far cry from the time when the Iraqis tried to militarily take control of the crossing point to the Rojava of Pêsh Khabour, before giving up in the face of peshmergas' resistance...

But tensions over oil remain. The

2019 budget provides that in return for Baghdad paying the salaries of its civil servants, the Kurdistan Region must provide 250,000 barrels of crude oil per day to the state-owned company SOMO (*State Oil Marketing Organization*). But by 21 June, almost in the middle of the year, the KRG had still not made any deliveries, although reports put its production at 600 or 700,000 barrels/day and its exports at over 400,000 (*Asharq Al-Awsat*). For the first time since his appointment, the Iraqi Prime Minister has raised his voice, threatening to cut the region's budget if it does not meet its obligations. MP Aram Balatayi (PDK), a member of the Parliamentary Oil and Gas Committee, replied indirectly the next day, assuring that as soon as the new Kurdish government was formed, a delegation would travel to Baghdad to discuss the issue. Balatayi added that the KRG, having previously signed contracts with companies exploiting its fields, must first sell its oil to pay them their dues, but that if Baghdad agreed to bear these costs, it could deliver the oil quickly (*Kurdistan 24*)...

Another point of strong local tensions is the governance of the territories disputed between KRG and the federal government. The leaders of the Kurdish factions in the Iraqi Parliament on 18 December called for the establishment of a parliamentary committee to monitor the implementation of article 140 of the 2005 constitution. This article, which was never applied, provided that the populations of the disputed territories were to vote by referendum in December 2007 on the future of these territories. The Iraqi Parliament voted on 29 November to create the Commission. It remains to be seen whether and how it works....

The torrential rains that caused

flooding and population displacements throughout the Middle East had an unexpected consequence in the desert areas of southern Iraq: they brought to light many human remains, causing the discovery in Muthanna province, 300 km south of Baghdad, of three mass graves dating from the genocidal operations of the *Anfal* carried out by the Ba'ath regime in 1987-88. A GRK delegation led by the Minister of Martyrs and *Anfal*, Baravan Hamdî, visited the last discovered grave on the 19th, which contains about 300 bodies. A forensic team is expected to begin exhumations in mid-June (*Rûdaw, ISHM*).

Still in connection with this sad legacy, the Prime Minister of the KRG called on Baghdad on the 21st for the equalization of pensions between former Kurdish political prisoners and their counterparts in the federal government: they receive 1.2 million dinars (900 €) per month against only 500.000 dinars (375 €) for the Kurds... At the end of March 2018, the Iraqi parliament voted for equal treatment, Baghdad having to send the Kurdish pensions to the Ministry of Martyrs and *Anfal* independently of the KRG budget. Although Baghdad accepted the principle on 11 August and the Iraqi Political Prisoners Association has asked to register Kurdish prisoners, the equalization is still not applied (*Rûdaw*)...

Concerning a more recent genocide, that of the Yezidis by ISIS in 2014, Hediye Mourad Haider, Yezidie deputy (KDP) in the Erbil parliament, announced on 16 August that he had introduced a bill proposing to institute an official commemoration every 3 August. Haider added that it was the responsibility of the Iraqi State to compensate the victims and their relatives (*Kurdistan 24*).

Finally, after rumours about the

KRG retaining some of the funds sent by Baghdad to pay its officials, Finance Minister Rebaz Hamlan rejected any misconduct on 27 July. He indicated that there had been delays in sending salaries in 2018, and that for both 2018 and 2019, the amounts received did not cover all of them: for 2019 the GRK had to supplement the amounts received, 2,266 billion dinars, with 1,831 billion from its own budget, to put an end to salary deductions. By 2018, it had already completed with 3.618 billion (*Kurdistan 24*).

Finally, tension remains high in the country: on 14 July, security forces opened fire on demonstrators in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, killing 2 people and injuring 12 (*ISHM*), and the following day, violent anti-corruption demonstrations in Najaf killed 4 people and injured 17 (*Rûdaw*). On 16 August, Washington ordered the evacuation of its "non-essential" diplomatic personnel stationed in Baghdad and Erbil, shortly after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned of a "very specific threat" due to "Iranian activity" in the country. The issuance of visas has been stopped....

In Kurdistan, on the 2nd, the *Goran* movement, and later in the day, UPK spokesman Latif Sheikh Omer said in essence that they were ready to sign a government agreement with the KDP. Omer indicated on the *NRT* that he would wait for the PDK to set a date for the signature. The KDP indicated that it hoped to form the new KRG by the end of May... On 5 May, the KDP and the UPK announced that they had reached an agreement on the distribution of ministerial portfolios (*ISHM*), and on 7 May, a delegation from the KDP went to Suleimaniyeh to meet *Goran* and formally sign the agreement with the UPK. The next day, in a session chaired by its President Vala Farîd, the

Kurdistan Parliament reactivated the function of President and changed its method of appointment so that it would be chosen by deputies by a simple majority, and no longer by universal suffrage. Disagreements on this point had in the past caused such tensions that the parliament had ceased to function. The acceptance by the KDP of the new method of appointment has helped to reduce tension, particularly with *Goran*. The bill was passed by 82 votes out of 111 seats; the 12 “New Generation» deputies voted against (*Al-Monitor*), as well as those of the Islamic Union (*Yekgirtû*); the Islamic Group (*Komal*) opposed some aspects of the amendment. The new law also created the position of Second Vice-President. This reactivation was a necessary step in the formation of a new government, since it is the President who must appoint the Prime Minister responsible for forming it...

On the 12th, the Parliament announced that candidates for the Presidency should be submitted from the 12th to the 15th, and recalled the 3 conditions of eligibility: residing in the Kurdistan Region, being over 40 years old, and possessing their civil and political rights. The KDP candidate is none other than Nechirvan Barzani, who would be replaced as Prime Minister of the KRG by Masrouf Barzani, the current head (“Chancellor”) of the Security Council (*Kurdistan 24*). According to the agreement between PDK, *Goran* and UPK, Moustafa Sayid Qadir (*Goran*), former Peshmergas minister, would become Vice-President.

On the 19th, the parliament announced 5 candidates, but, not surprisingly, on the 28th, Nechirvan Barzani was elected. However, only 81 deputies were present out of 111, with the UPK finally calling for a boycott of the

session (*AFP*). PDK and UPK then blamed each other for the failure to comply with the agreement reached: the UPK accused the PDK of not having implemented the agreement concerning the choice of the Governor of Kirkuk, who was supposed to go to the UPK, the PDK replied that it had complied with the agreement, the choice of the Governor being settled by the two leaders Massoud Barzani (PDK) and Kosrat Rassoul (UPK). According to the KDP statement, after they had agreed on the name Faraydoun Abdul-Qadir, the UPK reportedly returned 3 other names the day before the parliamentary session, “which constituted a violation of the agreements”... Another unresolved issue is the choice of the common candidate for the post of Minister of Justice in Baghdad, vacant since Abdul Mahdi’s appointment last October (*Kurdistan 24*)...

On 30 June, Parliament announced that the swearing-in ceremony for the new President would be held on 10 June, not in Parliament in view of the large attendance expected, but at the Saad Abdullah Conference Centre, near Erbil Park. According to *Kurdistan 24*, it is on June 12 that Nechirvan Barzani will call Masrouf Barzani to form the regional government within 30 days.

In the Kurdistan Region’s domestic politics, another case also occupied the press columns: the threat of blackmail within the “New Generation» movement, which eventually led to the arrest in mid-May of its founder and leader Shaswar Abdulwahid. After a raid by the *Asayish* (Security) of Suleimaniyeh, dependent on the UPK, on the office of the movement in that city, and the arrest of several of its members, Abdulwahid had denounced political motives. On 9 April, *Rûdaw* announced that 5 members

of the movement had been arrested on 6 April, and that 5 others were now the subject of warrants for threats of blackmail and insults against other members of the movement: on 24 April, MP Shadi Nawzad filed a complaint after receiving a text message threatening to broadcast a video showing her naked, shot without her knowledge by cameras hidden in a housing used by the movement. She had received the support of many women MPs from all parties, in Erbil or Baghdad. After the launch of a criminal investigation, the *Asayish* of Suleimaniyeh broadcast on the 9th the filmed confessions of 5 people. On the 14th, a court in Suleimaniyeh issued a warrant against Shaswar Abdulwahid himself. Imprisoned on the 15th, he immediately went on hunger strike. On the evening of the 22nd, the movement, denouncing a political arrest, announced that after a week of fasting, his health was “unstable”. The governor of Sulaimaniyeh, Haval Aboubakir (*Goran*), replied that the arrest was indeed the result of a legal procedure (*Rûdaw*). Finally, Abdulwahid was released on bail on the 30th.

The outcome of the month shows a very worrying intensification of jihadist attacks in disputed territories where they are freely deployed between the lines of the Kurdish peshmergas and the Iraqi military. Already on April 29, ISIS’s leader, Abu-Bakr al-Bagdadi, had reappeared in a video where he promised his enemies a “long battle”. The next day, the jihadists reported killing a member of the Suleimaniyeh *Asayish* who had fallen into their hands 4 days earlier. His body was discovered on the 5th at the foot of Mount Qarachogh, not far from Makhmour, with a bullet in the head (*Rûdaw*). Meanwhile, on the 2nd, Iraqi Security announced that it had killed an important ISIS commander and his assistant in an

early morning ambush in Nineveh province.

Jihadists also burned down many crops throughout the month to obtain payments or ambush their enemies. On May 27, the Iraqi Civil Defence Directorate made a frightening assessment: nearly 2,500 hectares (6,103 acres) of fields burned in 136 different attacks over 18 days in 11 provinces of the country. The most affected provinces are precisely those of the disputed territories: Salahaddin, Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala... (*Kurdistan 24*)

On the 4th, two successive improvised explosive devices exploded in the village of Moukhaysa (Diyala), killing 1 person and injuring 3 others. On the 7th, the jihadists killed 3 civilians in Mazarieh (Salahaddin), and in the evening 3 police officers at a checkpoint in Altun Kupri, between Erbil and Kirkuk. On the 9th, an attack was reported on the house of a village *mukhtar* in Nineveh province, killing him and 4 of his relatives (*ISHM*). On the 12th, farmers in Makhmur (Nineveh) asked to be protected from jihadists seeking to extort *diya* («blood money») from them by threatening to burn their fields (*Iraqi News*). That same evening, the jihadists murdered a father and his son, both members of the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party (*Rojinfo*, *NRT*). The next day, an improvised explosive device exploded in the same province, near Tell Afar, killing an Iraqi soldier and injuring 3 others (*ISHM*). On the 15th, jihadists set fire to other fields near Mount Qarachogh. On 15 and 16, they killed 9 Iraqi security personnel, including 4 officers, in blitz attacks near Hawija, in southwestern Kirkuk province. On the 18th, ISIS set again fire to crops in Diyala province. Several attacks in this area have resulted in a total of 4 civilian deaths in one week,

including one teacher (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 19th, again in Diyala, an improvised explosive device targeting Shia militia vehicles killed or wounded 26 members of the militia. The next day, 1 civilian was killed and 3 others wounded in the same way near Tell Afar (Nineveh) (*ISHM*). On the 22nd, 1 policeman was killed and 5 others wounded in Salahaddin.

On the 23rd, a joint operation between the French military and peshmergas made it possible to eliminate at least 3 jihadists near Tuz Khurmatu, free about ten villages and dismantle several weapons depots (*Rûdaw*). But two days later, other fields were set on fire in Taza Khurmatu (Hawija) and Daquq (*NRT*). On the 26th, an unclaimed bomb attack at the Rabia market near the Syrian border killed 5 people and injured at least 8. On the evening of the 27th, a jihadist attack on the oil fields near Hamrin Mountains and the city of Tikrit was repelled, the second attack in this area in a week (*Kurdistan 24*).

But it was at the end of the month that the most serious attacks took place. On the evening of the 20th, the fields of several Kakai villages in the south of Kirkuk province were set on fire, and on the 30th, those of the village of Haftaghar, 35 km South of this city, were set on fire. As farmers tried to save their crops, jihadists opened fire, killing 1 person and injuring 9 (*Kurdistan 24*). And on the same night, a series of 5 explosions (6 according to other sources) struck the city of Kirkuk, killing at least 7 people and injuring dozens (*RFI*). On the 31st, the Iraqi Ministry of Health reported 2 deaths and 38 injured, including women and children.

On the same day, the Parliamentary Committee for the Monitoring of Disputed Territories condemned this situation as a

“new Arabization campaign”: some Kurdish farmers who were victims of the fire in their fields testified that the perpetrators were Arab settlers from the Ba’ath era who had returned to evict them. Like the Peshmerga Ministry and the various Kurdish parties, the Commission has called for the return of the peshmergas and the joint management of the province’s security between them and the Iraqi military, as well as the management of the city’s security by the local police and security forces, in order to “put an end to militarisation”. It also called for the dismissal of Rakan al-Jaburi, the interim governor appointed by former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, and “serious efforts” to implement Article 140 of the Constitution (*Kurdistan 24*). Kurdish parties still accuse Jaburi of reactivating the Arabisation policy of the previous regime (he issued 14 decrees seizing land belonging to Kurds and re-allocating it to Arabs, before the Iraqi Federal Court cancelled them last December) and of illegally committing funds received from Baghdad without consulting the Provincial Council. But they have still not been able to agree on a candidate who could be elected by the Provincial Council to replace him. The disagreement also affects the meeting place: several advisors, including KDP members, refuse to return to Kirkuk, which they consider to be under military occupation by Baghdad. On 30 April, a new session of the Council had to be postponed due to a lack of quorum (*Kurdistan 24*). The Arab faction of the Council, led by Jaburi himself, obviously refuses to participate in the meetings...

Many testimonies this month concern attempts to evict Kurdish farmers by former Arab settlers who have returned to the area. On the 14th in the village of Palkana (Sargaran), in the west of the province, some 200 Arab families

with invalid Ba'athist property titles arrived in a convoy of 25 vehicles and forcibly evicted several Kurdish families. According to Kurdish residents, they have received support from the security forces. On the 16th, in Kirkuk, security forces bulldozed 4 houses belonging to Kurdish peshmerga families in the Arafa district. The reason given: the land would belong to the *North Oil Company*. But according to the inhabitants, Arab or Turkmen houses in the same case were not targeted... On the 17th, several Kurdish farmers in the village of Mama (Dibis) complained that their crops had been harvested at night by Arabs from Baaj, in neighbouring Nineveh province... Agricultural equipment was also stolen (*Kurdistan 24*). On the 18th, an official source told *Shafaq News* that 600 Kurdish families had been expelled from 3 villages in Kirkuk

(*ISHM*). On 22 September, four Kurdish citizens of Kirkuk were arrested after refusing to leave their homes claimed by the *North Oil Company*. According to local reports, Governor al-Jaburi regularly issues administrative orders for eviction in groups of 5 houses (*Kurdistan 24*). The Erbil Parliament's Human Rights Committee has called for the suspension of the Governor's administrative decisions as violations of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution, in particular Article 140 thereof.

On 22nd, following the acute conflict in Palkana, a meeting was held with local authorities, including the mayor of the village, officials of the Kirkuk Department of Agriculture, some of the Arab settlers, and Jaburi. A Commission of Inquiry has been set up, and pending its conclusions, Kurdish landowners have been "allowed to

harvest" their fields! Arab settlers reported building houses in the region before 2003, with Jaburi supporting them by stating that "Arabs were the original inhabitants of Sargaran"... This type of conflict caused harvests to stop in 16 predominantly Kurdish areas of Kirkuk province (*Rûdaw*). On 27 July, a member of the Erbil Parliament's Committee on Contested Territories, Naser Ahmed, reported to *Kurdistan 24* that the deputies would form a new Committee to visit these territories and travel to Baghdad to push for the implementation of article 140. Another MP, Mahyadin Hassan, indicated that the Commission could also request the dismissal of the current President of the Iraqi Council on the disputed territories, Hadi al-Ameri, who is also the leader of the Iranian-backed *Fatah* Coalition (*Kurdistan 24*).

IRAN:

NEW DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE DETERIORATION OF THE ECONOMY

Concerned about the May 1st rallies, the regime tried to prevent them in Kurdish cities, including imprisoning activist Zanyar Dabagian in Sanandadj after a one-year prison sentence for "propaganda against the government" (*WKI*). In Tehran, a demonstration of several thousand people, called by the bus drivers' union in particular, had begun to chant slogans in front of the parliament denouncing high living costs and inflation, but the police intervened very violently to disperse the group, not hesitating to hit demonstrators already on land, and stopping at least 35 participants. Two journalists covering the demonstration, Kayvan Samimi, editor-in-chief of *Iran-e-Farda*, and Marzieh Amiri of *Shargh Daily*, were also arrested. On 6 June, the CPJ (*Committee to Protect Journalists*) called for their release.

Also on May 1st, an incident involving members of Iraqi Shia militias (*Hashd al-Shaabi*), who officially came to Iran in mid-April to participate in post-flood assistance, was reported. The authorities have been accused on social networks of actually bringing these militiamen to the country's border provinces, particularly Kurdistan, to help suppress demonstrations caused by the deteriorating economy, or even to assist the *pasdaran* against the Kurdish rebels. According to a local testimony transmitted to *Kurdistan 24*, through the human rights organization *Hengaw*, some of these militiamen fired on a vehicle in Oshnavieh, killing two cross-border Kurdish or *Kolbar* porters. Although unarmed, they continue to be regularly targeted by Iranian *pasdaran* or border guards. In the first week of the month alone, six of them were killed, including the two victims of Iraqi militiamen. On the 4th, a *kolbar*

was killed and three others wounded in an ambush by the *pasdaran* near Nowsoud. Another attack took place near Salmas. On May 5, two *kolbars* drowned while trying to cross a lake near Urumieh. On the 7th, the body of another carrier who had disappeared three months earlier was found near Baneh, dead of cold (*WKI*). On the 9th, another carrier from Kermanshah fell to his death in a ravine while trying to escape the border guards. The next day, they seriously injured another *kolbar*, who then died in hospital in Piranshahr. On May 11, two more *kolbars* were killed by gunfire near Bokan and the next day another wounded near Sardasht. On the 14th, another, barely 17 years old, drowned in a river near Oshnavieh, and on the 19th, another was killed by shooting at his group near Baneh. On 28, KMMK and *Hengaw* announced that the Iranian army had killed 4 *kolbars* and wounded 2

others in Piranshahr. To date, the *Kurdistan Human Rights Association* (KMMK) has counted 39 dead and 80 injured carriers (*RojInfo*) since early 2019.

Arrests and convictions of Kurdish activists also continued. For example, Ataollah Ahsani of Divandarreh, sentenced to 7 years' imprisonment for "insulting sacred symbols" after participating in demonstrations against the regime in 2018, Daniel Darab, sentenced to one year's imprisonment in Kermanshah for "acts against national security", or 2 Uroumieh Kurds arrested in October 2018, Bihzad and Mikael Shahswar, sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment for "belonging to opposition parties". On the 8th, officers of the *Etelaat* (Intelligence Service) arrested a Kurdish trade union activist, Ishaq Rûhî, in Sanandaj, without knowing the cause. At the same time, two environmental activists, Sîrwan Qurbanî and Hadî Kamangar, arrested in December 2018 at the same time as six others by *Etelaat*, were transferred to prison pending trial. The fate of their 6 companions remains unknown, which frequently happens in the event of incarceration by *Etelaat*... (WKI).

Despite repression, in several cities in Iran's Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Marivan, Sanandaj, Saqqez, Urumieh, and Kamyaran, teachers dared to gather to protest against their working conditions and oppose the regime's plans to privatize some schools. Among the many movements and strikes following

the economic downturn, on the 12th, taxi drivers in Urumieh went on strike all day to protest against their low incomes and the sharp increase in the price of car parts following the devaluation of the rial. In Khorramabad, municipal employees gathered outside the town hall to protest against the non-payment of their salaries (WKI).

On 15 May, three members of the Iranian Writers' Association, Baktash Abtin, Reza Khandan Mahabadi, and Keyvan Bajan, were sentenced to 6 years in prison for "propaganda against the State" and "collusion against State security": they had dared to publish a story of their group, founded in 1968 to fight censorship, and to hold ceremonies commemorating their comrades Mohammad Mokhtari and Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh, murdered by the State in 1998 by gathering at their graves (CHRI).

Recent arrests in Kurdistan include a large number of women. On the 14th, Iran Rah-Paykar was arrested in Marivan, on her return from Iraqi Kurdistan, and transferred to the *Etelaat* detention centre in Sanandaj. On the 16th, the regime's security forces raided the village of Kûlan (Marivan) and arrested at least 7 activists, including 3 Kurdish women, Daiman Fat'hi, Somayyeh Rûzbeh and Mojdeh Mardokhi. Again, it was to prevent a commemorative rally on a grave, that of Nermin Vatankhah, previously murdered in Marivan. On 18 May, two of the three women arrested, Daiman Fat'hi, Somayyeh Ruzbeh, were charged with "disturbing pub-

lic order". Several other women activists have been arrested throughout the country, including for encouraging women to give up their veils (NCR).

Meanwhile, three new environmental activists, Mahdi Qubadi, Rashad Montazari, and Jalal Rostami, were transferred to prison after months of detention in *Etelaat* cells (WKI, KMMK).

In addition, after two months of hunger strike, which began in protest at the unfair treatment of political prisoners in Iran, the health of activist Barzan Mohammadi continues to deteriorate. Mohammadi is serving a 6-year sentence imposed on him in 2017 for "gathering a group against national security" (WKI).

Nationally, political activist and former advisor to green movement leader Mehdi Karroubi, Hengameh Shahidi, was sentenced on the 13th by a Tehran Court of Appeal to 7 years and 6 months in prison for "propaganda against the state", "insults to officials" and "spreading false news", in fact for criticising former Justice Minister Sadegh Larijani (CHRI).

Finally, a new earthquake of 5.3 magnitude struck the border area between Iranian Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq on 11 November. In contrast to the 2017 earthquake that struck Kermanshah in 2017, which killed 630 people and injured 8,000 in Kurdish settlements in Iran, there were no casualties.

FRANCE: THE INVESTIGATION INTO THE MURDER OF THE THREE KURDISH ACTIVISTS RESTARTS

Six years after the triple murder of Kurdish activists in Paris on 6 January 2013, their families obtained the reopening of the investigation. An anti-terrorist judge was

appointed on the 14th to resume investigations, and will work in particular on the involvement of the Turkish intelligence services (TIS). The three activists, Sakine Cansiz, 54, Fidan Dogan, 28, and Leyla Saylemez, 24, were killed

by several bullets to the head. The suspect, Omer Güney, betrayed by surveillance cameras and ammunition traces on his belongings, died of brain cancer in December 2016, just before his trial before the Paris Special

Court of Assize opened, resulting in the investigation being halted.

But families could not accept to leave it at that. They fought to have the investigations resumed - not without difficulties. At the beginning of 2017, a new complaint was filed on the basis of new information, documents indirectly incriminating the Turkish secret services. But the public prosecutor, once these documents have been translated into French, closes the complaint without further action. In January 2018, thousands of Kurds demonstrated in Paris to demand "truth" and "justice" and denounce the inaction and silence

of the French authorities. In March 2018, the families filed a new complaint and filed a civil suit to obtain the appointment of an investigating judge. It is on this basis that the Paris Public Prosecutor's Office finally opened a judicial investigation for "complicity in murders in connection with a terrorist enterprise" and "criminal terrorist criminal conspiracy", according to a judicial source. One of the family lawyers, Antoine Comte, told AFP: "It is historic, the end of impunity for political killings in France sponsored from abroad. ...] The prosecutor admits that the case is not over with the death of the suspect, a judge will be able

to examine all the elements, in the first place the involvement of a foreign country, already pointed out by the initial investigation" (AFP). Indeed, the first investigation had indeed noted the involvement of MIT members, through the suspect's contacts, and his (thwarted) plan to escape from prison, which did indeed provide for the participation of a MIT member... The investigation had not, however, made it possible to determine whether these members of the Turkish secret services had acted on orders or on their own initiative. The survey that is starting will have to try to answer these questions, among many others....

FRANCE:

ARREST OF A LYONS-BASED TURKISH MATHEMATICIAN

On May 14, the same day that the investigation into the Paris murders was relaunched, at least 150 people gathered in Lyon to demand the release of the Turkish mathematician Tuna Altinel. Among the demonstrators, members of the *Association Amitiés kurdes de Lyon* (Lyons Kurdish Friendship Association), but also many students and students of the University of Lyon 1 and members of the "Sud Solidaires" trade union and the PCF. Established in France since 1996, Altinel, a respected human rights defender and internationally recognized mathematician, is a lecturer at this university (*Le Figaro*).

What is he accused of in Turkey? To have, like more than 2,000 academics, signed in 2016 a petition denouncing the plight of civilians in the Kurdish regions of Turkey in the face of violence by Turkish security forces. His trial was held in February and the verdict was expected in July. But last February, Altinay was wrong to act as an interpreter during the public meet-

ing of a Kurdish association in Villeurbanne to the former HDP Faysal deputy Yıldız. This led to further legal problems for him, as the Turkish authorities used Article 7/2 of the "Anti-Terror Law" to have him arrested on 10 May at Balıkesir, where he had gone to inquire about the restrictions imposed on his passport. The French government confirmed on 13 July that he was in pre-trial detention, expressing its "concern". He is now charged with "propaganda for a terrorist organization". His colleagues and students in the mathematics department of Lyon 1 have set up a support committee and maintain contact with the French Ministries of Higher Education and Research and Foreign Affairs. The French National Council for Higher Education and Research (CNESER) unanimously decided to ask the Ministers of the European Union, Higher Education and Foreign Affairs in France to "take the necessary steps to ensure that Turkey respects the freedom of expression of academics". In a speech delivered on 16 May, the French

Minister of Higher Education, Frédérique Vidal, expressed her deep concern, stressing that Altinel should be able to return to France as soon as possible and resume her work. The European Mathematical Society also made a statement regarding this arrest, stressing that it was a violation of human rights and demanding his immediate release (*Bianet*). Several trials also began this month in Turkey against other academics who signed the same petition, including some who had denounced themselves to the judicial authorities in solidarity with their accused colleagues, such as Zeynep Tanbay or Halim Bulutoğlu, whose lawyer relied on the verdict of the Constitutional Court ordering the release of Ayşe Celik to demand their immediate acquittal...

On the 16th, *L'Humanité* made Tuna Altinel its "man of the day", and on the 30th, two PS senators from the Rhône wrote to the French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe to ask him what steps France «[was planning] to take for the release of Mr Altinel» (*LyonMag.com*).

YAZIDIS ARRIVE IN TOULOUSE; POLEMIC ON FRENCH JIHADISTS' FATE

On May 22, 132 Yazidis left Erbil, Kurdistan, Iraq, at midday for France, where they are to resettle as part of a cooperation program with the International Organization for Migration (ISHM) funded by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has already enabled 16 families to start a new life in the country. That same evening, 28 Yazidi women and their children landed in Toulouse-Blagnac. It was following a meeting between Nadia Murad, 2018 Nobel Peace Prize winner, and French President Emmanuel Macron, that this operation was set up. The president had committed himself to her for an "exceptional reception operation" benefiting 100 Yazidi families (*The Telegram*). Some of the families will be welcomed in the Tarn department (county).

In a related information, on 29 July, a Yazidi association in Germany filed a criminal complaint against

the German Ministers of Justice and Home Affairs for failing to make sufficient efforts to repatriate ISIS fighters to Germany for trial, pointing in particular to their recent "refusal to transfer a German citizen detained by the autonomous administration of northern and eastern Syria". According to recent figures from the Ministry of the Interior, some 60 German jihadists are currently prisoners of the Syrian Democratic Forces (*AFP*).

In France too, the possible repatriation of jihadist families detained in Rojava (or its refusal by the French authorities) continues to be controversial. On 6 May, the grandparents of two children held in al-Hol camp in Rojava with their mother, brought an action before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) seeking a conviction against France for refusing to repatriate them. The lawyers argue that France's decision "constitutes a violation of article 3, paragraph 2, of Protocol No. 4, according

to which "no one may be deprived of the right to enter the territory of the State of which he is a national". (*AFP*). According to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, approximately 450 French nationals are currently detained in Syria (*Le Figaro*). On 28th, the death sentence in Iraq of 6 French jihadists provoked a new controversy. The Quai d'Orsay immediately reacted by reaffirming its opposition in principle to the death penalty. On 31 December, the human rights organisation *Human Rights Watch* called on Paris not to "outsource the management" of alleged French jihadists to "abusive judicial systems". Some French defendants, showing marks on their bodies, told the audience that their interrogators had beaten them to extract confessions or that they had to sign confessions in Arabic, a language they do not know. According to HRW, some Iraqi interrogators use torture that leaves no visible traces, such as drowning simulations.

SUSAN MEISELAS WINS

THE 2019 AWARD FROM THE DEUTSCHE BÖRSE PHOTOGRAPHY FOUNDATION

Photographer Susan Meiselas, well known to the Kurds for her photographic history of Kurdistan, featured in her book *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History* (<https://boutique.institutkurde.org/fr/english/28-kurdistan-in-the-shadow-of-history.html>) and on her website "akaKurdistan" (<https://www.akakurdistan.com>), won the 2019 award from the *Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation*. Meiselas was awarded for its first European retrospective, *Mediations*, presented in 2018 at the Musée du Jeu de Paume in Paris. The announcement of the award was made at a special ceremony at the *Photographers' Gallery*

in London on May 16 by Turkish-born British writer and activist Elif Shafak.

For this exhibition, Meiselas had chosen works from her engagement with the Kurds. She said in an interview with the *British Journal of Photography* that she hoped visitors could gain "a deeper appreciation of the experience of Kurds and others who have had to flee their country of origin and face unpredictable conditions without being able to return safely". Meiselas arrived in Iraq's Kurdistan in 1991 with the forensic team exhuming the bodies of victims of the *Anfal* genocidal operations launched by the Ba'athist regime. In addition to the

book and website already mentioned, this experience also led her to organize a series of workshops to collect the memories of Kurds around the world.

The works of the artists selected for the prize will remain on display in London until 9 June, before leaving for Frankfurt from 14 June to 23 August. Created by the *Photographers' Gallery* in London in 1996, the £30,000 prize was then awarded to the *Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation*, a non-profit organisation specifically dedicated to the collection, exhibition and promotion of contemporary photography (*L'Œil de la Photographie, British Journal of Photography*).

TWO KURDISH WOMEN ELECTED TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

As a testimony to the excellent integration of the Kurdish community in Europe and its democratic institutions, two Kurdish women were elected to the European Parliament in two different countries during the elections held this month.

Evin Incir, 34, a 34-year-old resident of the city of Upsalla, north

of Stockholm, was elected in Sweden on the Social Democratic Party list, where she ranked fifth. In an interview given before the election to the Kurdish television channel of Iraq *Kurdistan 24*, she stated whether she was elected to advance the Kurdish cause and to address in parliament “the oppression and injustice from which the Kurds have suffered and continue to suffer”.

Özlem Alev Demirel, 35, who entered politics at the age of 19, was elected to the list of the German Left Party, of which she was one of the two main candidates. Kurdish Alevi from the city of Malatya, Demirel, who studied at the University of Bonn, expressed her willingness to “work hard” to become “the voice of the voiceless”.

PUBLICATIONS: *KURD'INALCO*, JOURNAL OF THE KURDISH STUDENTS OF THE PARIS INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL LANGUAGES

While 15 May is the date of the Kurdish Language Festival (*Cejna zimanê Kurdi*), in tribute to the publication on 15 May 1932 in Damascus of the Kurdish magazine *Hawar*, published by a team led by Celadet Elî Bedirxan, we are pleased to announce on 28 May the publication of the first issue of the student magazine of the Kurdish section of INALCO (French *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales*), *Kurd'inalco*.

INALCO, where the Kurdish language has been taught since 1948, has a special link with the Kurds and Kurdistan, since one of the first presidents, the orientalist Pierre Amédée Jaubert, who was Bonaparte's interpreter in Egypt, is known to have visited Kurdistan himself in 1805.... Moreover, Kurdish publications outside Kurdistan, such as the *Kurdistan* newspaper, published in Cairo in 1898 before moving to the United Kingdom, or the magazine of

Kurdish students in Europe, *Dengê Kurdistan*, have historically played an important role in the defence of the Kurdish language and culture.

This first issue of *Kurd'inalco*, with 83 pages, contains articles in Kurmancî and Soranî that cover linguistics, literature, history, social sciences and mathematics.

For further information or to receive the magazine: kovarakurdinalco@gmail.com.

Paris troque ses djihadistes contre de l'équipement militaire

La France a offert à l'Irak du matériel en échange de la prise en charge par ce pays de combattants français de l'État islamique détenus par les Kurdes.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT
@Malbrunot

IRAK Adel Abdel Mahdi, le chef du gouvernement irakien qui jouit de la réalité du pouvoir à Bagdad, est presque chez lui en France. L'ancien opposant à Saddam Hussein y a passé près de quarante ans, avant de revenir en 2003 en Irak, une fois le dictateur renversé par les militaires américains.

Quant à son épouse, elle réside toujours près de Saint-Étienne. Sa francophilie ne sera pas de trop pour relancer la relation entre Paris et Bagdad. Les deux pays ont plus que jamais besoin l'un de l'autre, mais les obstacles sont encore nombreux.

Sans parti politique derrière lui, Adel Abdel Mahdi reste, six mois après son entrée en fonction, un premier ministre faible dans un système marqué par la professionnalisation du pouvoir. « *Il a besoin d'afficher qu'il est soutenu par une puissance internationale* », décrypte l'universitaire franco-irakien Hosham Dawood.

Même si le voisin iranien a adoubé le chiite Adel Abdel Mahdi, Téhéran ne lui facilite pas la tâche, jouant des nombreux leviers dont l'Irak dispose en Irak. Quant à ses relations avec les États-Unis, elles sont tendues par les pressions exercées par les factions chiites pro-iraniennes, qui réclament le départ des 5 200 soldats américains, restés en Irak, après la victoire remportée par la coalition internationale sur Daech. Signe de ces tensions : Donald Trump aurait reporté une prochaine visite à Washington de M. Abdel Mahdi, en signe de mécontentement face à ses positions jugées pro-iraniennes.

La France soutient le premier ministre irakien dans sa volonté de se désengager de sa double tutelle américano-iranienne. Pour ce faire, Adel Abdel Mahdi s'est rapproché de son voisinage arabe sunnite, qu'il s'agisse de l'Arabie saoudite, de l'Égypte ou de la Jordanie.

À l'issue du combat contre Daech en Syrie en Irak, Paris lui doit une fière chandelle : Bagdad a accepté de recevoir dans ses prisons de nombreux djihadistes français, détenus jusque-là dans les geôles des Kurdes syriens, qui étaient sous la menace d'une offensive militaire turque ou d'une reprise en main par Damas.



Adel Abdel Mahdi,
chef du gouvernement irakien.
TOBIAS SCHWARZ/AFP

Les Irakiens rendent un grand service à la France

UN EXPERT DE LA RELATION FRANCO-IRAKIENNE

Officiellement, 14 Français ont été transférés vers Bagdad, mais d'autres s'ajouteraient à cette liste. L'Irak réclame 1,8 milliard de dollars aux pays occidentaux pour gérer le fardeau que représente la gestion de centaines de prisonniers, indésirables dans leur pays d'origine.

« *Les Irakiens rendent un grand service à la France* », constate un expert de la relation franco-irakienne. « *On*

ignore si les Français transférés ont vraiment du sang irakien sur les mains, Bagdad couvre donc certaines choses. Ensuite, ajoute cette source, les Irakiens vont les garder, voire peut-être les liquider. Bagdad a volontairement oublié que ces gens-là ont facilement quitté la France en 2013-2014. L'Irak pourrait demander des comptes à la France, mais Adel Abdel Mahdi ne veut pas avoir de problèmes avec Paris. »

Qu'a-t-il obtenu en échange ? Selon nos informations, Bagdad a arraché un rééquilibrage de la position française en faveur du pouvoir central au détriment des Kurdes irakiens. En contrepartie, la France veut avoir des facilités à partir du territoire irakien pour que ses forces spéciales déployées en Syrie puissent s'y replier, une fois les soldats américains partis du Nord-Est syrien.

Bagdad négocie également le maintien d'une présence militaire française en Irak où 1 200 soldats restent station-

nés. Des pourparlers concernent enfin les canons Caesar français, en fin de mission dans le nord de l'Irak près de la frontière syrienne, mais leur cession à Bagdad n'est pas encore actée.

Une délégation des services de renseignements irakiens était récemment à Paris. Outre du renseignement satellitaire offert à Bagdad, la France a remis à l'Irak du matériel d'écoutes et des sondes pour espionner des réseaux de téléphone. En revanche, selon nos informations, les États-Unis se sont opposés à la fourniture d'une salle d'écoutes française au profit de l'ICTS, l'unité antiterroriste formée conjointement par Washington et Paris, qui fut en pointe dans la guerre contre Daech.

Paris compte enfin sur sa proximité avec Adel Abdel Mahdi pour relancer le commerce avec Bagdad. Un partenariat stratégique est en cours de finalisation. Emmanuel Macron a promis de se rendre d'ici à la fin de l'année en Irak. Plusieurs sociétés françaises sont en lice pour décrocher des contrats, comme Aéroports de Paris à Mossoul et Alstom en consortium avec Hyundai pour le métro de Bagdad, un projet de 2,5 milliards de dollars sur lequel pèsent déjà des soupçons de corruption. « *En Irak, tous les partis politiques ont des hommes liges qui font des affaires et l'argent récolté est partagé ensuite* », regrette un industriel, familier de Bagdad.

Sur les décombres de l'État islamique vaincu territorialement, une opportunité existe d'un réchauffement de la relation franco-irakienne. Mais dans un pays encore fracturé politiquement, sa reconstruction, à laquelle Paris compte prendre sa part, reste des plus hypothétiques dans un environnement régional, toujours aussi volatil. ■

Fear and doubt where ISIS once ruled



PHOTOGRAPHS BY IVOR PRICKETT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Left, the martyrs cemetery in Kobani, Syria. Right, Kurdish security forces in Raqqa. ISIS no longer rules the area, but thousands of its fighters continue to operate there.

MANBIJ, SYRIA

Security concerns in Syria overshadow relief felt after the group's territorial defeat

BY BEN HUBBARD
AND IVOR PRICKETT

Cities and towns across eastern Syria are overwhelmed by rubble. The militias that fought the Islamic State are digging tunnels to prepare for a possible battle against Turkey. A recent explosion in the city of Raqqa killed nine people.

The routing of the Islamic State from its final piece of territory in Syria in March was hailed as a milestone in the fight against the world's most fearsome terrorist organization. But the territory it once ruled remains in shambles, insecure, its future uncertain.

Entire communities are destroyed, with little help for rebuilding. A range of powers — the Syrian government, Turkey, Russia and militias backed by Iran — hope to fill the void left by the jihadists' defeat. And the Islamic State isn't even gone: while the bombings that killed at least 250 people in Sri Lanka on Easter demonstrated that its ideology continues to echo globally, in Syria thousands of its fighters have merely gone underground to launch attacks and plot their comeback.

"We are talking about a secret organization that is still operating," said Redur Xelil, a senior official with the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Kurdish-led militia that the United States backed to fight the jihadists. "It has a network, means of communication and a central command."

On Monday, the Islamic State released a video of its reclusive leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, in which he appears to be reasserting his leadership over the group.

A Kurdish-led administration is struggling to govern the area, which encompasses roughly the third of Syria east of the Euphrates River. But the United States, which led the military coalition to defeat the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, has not recognized the local administration and won't help with reconstruction.

Having won the war, the United States risks losing the peace.

The United States remains the area's de facto protector, its 2,000 troops presumed to be the only barrier deterring incursions by Russian, Turkish or Syrian government forces.

But the Trump administration's plans for those troops have fluctuated, from the complete withdrawal the president suddenly announced in December to the current plan of drawing the number down by half and seeing how it goes.

The uncertainty has confused American allies.

"There is no clarity," said Mr. Xelil, the senior S.D.F. official. "That is the problem with the Americans."

In recent visits to half a dozen towns and cities across northeastern Syria, we found that the relief that residents had over the territorial defeat of the Islamic State had been quickly overshadowed by the tenuous security and paralyzing uncertainty about where the region goes from here.

THE ISLAMIC STATE, UNDERGROUND

After five years of battle, the Islamic State no longer rules territory the size of Britain, but thousands of its fighters continue to operate in the region, striking when they can.

In recent months, a local military leader in one border town was killed when a bomb stuck to his car blew up. A tribal leader in Raqqa was killed in the street. And a gunman killed seven guards while they slept near a checkpoint.

Shervan Darwish, a member of the military council now ruling the town of Manbij, presumed the Islamic State was behind most of the attacks, including one in which a suicide bomber rammed his car. But there were enough other enemies — from the Syrian government to rival militias — that he could not be sure.

"They all want to undermine security in this city," he said. "But we don't know who did it."

The United States says it remains committed to the "enduring" defeat of the Islamic State, but it has done little to shape the political future of the jihadists' former lands. Local councils administer the territory and provide basic services.

The United States has provided aid but has not officially recognized the councils, arguing that its goals are to work for a political solution to the conflict and push Iran out of Syria, not determine local governance. The United States' local allies say this has left them in political limbo.

More than 70,000 women and children who once lived under the Islamic State now languish in three camps in northern Syria. About 10,000 of them are foreigners whose countries do not want them back, placing the long-term burden of caring for them on the local administration.

It also holds in its prisons 8,000 men accused of being fighters, including 1,000 foreigners, raising fears that prison breaks could help the Islamic State reconstitute itself.

"There are thousands of fighters and their families who are in an area that is

not militarily and politically stable," said Abdulkarim Omar, a local official who has tried with little success to convince governments to repatriate their citizens. "The international community is not carrying out its role."

DIGGING IN FOR THE NEXT BATTLE

Across a swath of territory near the Turkish border, men with shovels, winches and wheelbarrows are digging hundreds of tunnels to prepare for what could be the next big battle. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey has threatened to send Turkish troops to oust the militias, which he considers anti-Turkish terrorist groups.

Along main roads leading to Manbij, a large town near the Turkish border, new tunnels large enough for fighters to run through plunge into the earth every few hundred meters. Kobani, a Kurdish-majority town on the Turkish border, has become a virtual gopher mound, with tunnels along its main roads, near its graveyard, in traffic medians and within sight of Turkish border posts. S.D.F. officials declined to comment on the tunnels, but Mr. Darwish of the Manbij Military Council said they were for defense in the case of future attacks.

"Our last fight was with Daesh," he said, using another name for the Islamic State. "Our next battle will be with states, so this is part of our defense plan."

Throughout the war, Turkey watched with alarm as the American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces grew stronger along its border. The leading component

of the S.D.F. is a Kurdish militia called the Y.P.G., which is affiliated with the P.K.K., a Kurdish guerrilla movement that has fought a bloody, 30-year insurgency against Turkey and which the United States considers a terrorist organization.

The Syrian government and its Russian backers have vowed to take the territory back, by force if necessary.

Local leaders say they would prefer to reach an accommodation with Syria than fight Turkey, but negotiations have led nowhere, according to Ilham Ahmed, an official involved in the talks.

The local authority's efforts to chart a political future have been complicated by the United States' unclear policies, which can be overturned by an unexpected tweet from Mr. Trump.

"A country like America should not be like that," Ms. Ahmed said. "These statements from the president are a surprise for everyone."

A LASTING TOLL

The years of fighting the Islamic State took a tremendous toll, killing thousands of fighters and an untold number of civilians. Roads and roundabouts are dotted with signs commemorating fallen fighters, some of them billboards bearing dozens of faces.

Inside a rehabilitation hospital in Kobani, physical therapists work with wounded fighters. One, who gave his name as Siwar Kobani, lay strapped to a platform that rotated him into a standing position.

He had been fighting in Raqqa when a

blast peppered his back with shrapnel and paralyzed him from the waist down.

"It has been two years and I'm not getting better," he said.

About 200 people he knew had been killed fighting, but the sacrifice had been worth it, he said.

"If we hadn't fought them, we wouldn't have a better future for our children," he said.

Much of Raqqa, the area's largest city and once the jihadists' capital, remains in ruins. Life has returned to the streets, with shops and restaurants reopened and the traffic police shooing away drivers who clog intersections. But the rubble is overwhelming, and countless buildings remain uninhabitable.

In one heavily damaged neighborhood, a real estate agent, Muhammad al-Hamoud, stared from his office at the tableau of destruction. Since he had reopened two weeks earlier, most inquiries had been from former residents seeking to sell destroyed apartments. He had sold two, he said, both damaged, to buyers planning to fix them up.

"There is little demand because the years have been punishing to people — war, destruction and displacement," he said.

But he was counting on the neighborhood to come back to life, so he had rented the office, tiled the floor and bought chairs where he waits for the clients he is sure will eventually come.

Mustafa Ali contributed reporting.

KRG deputy PM meets with French experts to lay out better governance plan

By Rudaw.net 8/5/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – A group of French experts came to the Kurdistan Region on Tuesday to help in budgeting and auditing matters following a meeting between Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani and a French Finance Ministry delegation in Erbil.

"The French government is expected to send some of its experts to advise the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in budgeting and expense auditing matters in the Kurdistan Region in the next two months," a statement from the KRG read.

They are also due to "train government employees, help in amending old laws, and developing agriculture and tourism sectors," the statement added.

The areas the KRG primarily



Qubad Talabani (middle right), the deputy PM of the Kurdistan Regional Government, meets with a French delegation in Erbil, Kurdistan Region, on May 7, 2019.

needs help with are "auditing" and the "classic model of budgeting that is complex and cumbersome making it difficult to monitor corruption," Rewaz Fayege, the head of

finance and economic affairs committee in the KRG parliament, told Rudaw English.

Fayege stressed the KRG needs a modern model of budgeting that is

"more transparent, honest and detailed in order to be able to prevent corruption."

The KRG Integrity Commission has already started to crack down on corruption cases, but is facing difficulties due to the lack of sufficient prosecutors and laws that provide immunity to some officials involved in corruption. Last year, the Integrity Commission submitted 198 corruption cases to courts, but only 33 of them have been concluded – 16 in Duhok, 15 in Erbil, and two in Sulaimani.

"The problem is the lack of a special court to deal with corruption cases," Ahmad Anwar, the head of Integrity Commission, said at the time. They have submitted many cases to court and, two years on, hearing dates still have not been set for some of them, he said.

The commission also outlined another problem – the abundance ➤

➤ of immunity in the upper echelons of power that is preventing investigations into those accused of corruption. Many syndicates have immunity, meaning their members can appear before a court only if the syndicate gives its permission.

"In many offices, when one of their members is accused of corruption, he should take permission from his boss [to be able to appear before the court]. Some syndicates have fixed this in their laws. And this has created problems because having immunity or having to take permission from your boss prevents investigations," Anwar added.

The Integrity Commission has estimated that nearly 298.5 billion dinars (\$250 million) is wrapped up in the corruption cases. They have so far recuperated almost 5.4 billion dinars (\$4.5 million), mostly in Sulaimani province.

The lawmaker also said the KRG needs to "adjust its old central rules to the free open market in the Kurdistan Region" in order to attract more investors to the Region who often complain of unnecessary bureaucracy.

Fayeş said she couldn't comment on today's KRG meeting with the French Finance Ministry's

Department of International Aid, but said the KRG mainly needs training in areas of "auditing, monitoring, budgeting, and planning," adding it appears France is the country that is prepared to do this at this time.

Talabani was the list leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) campaign in the Iraqi and Kurdistan Region parliamentary elections last year. Campaigning on an anti-corruption platform, Talabani and the PUK did well — re-establishing itself as the second-largest Kurdistan party.

The deputy PM has spearheaded governmental transparency and

reform initiatives in Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's government.

"The decentralization of power has to be the priority of the next government and there should be a strong monitoring on the decentralized powers so as to know how they are managed," Talabani said at a forum in October 2018.

Prior to the elections, Talabani and US officials revealed the Iraqi Governance Performance and Accountability program to help the KRG and Iraq meet the needs of its people through better governance and delivery of services in March 2018. ■

lepoint.fr

2 mai 2019

Turquie: un maire communiste abat des murs et rebat les cartes

Tunceli (Turquie) (AFP) 02/05/2019
www.lepoint.fr

Après son élection le mois dernier, le premier acte de Fatih Maçoğlu en tant que maire de Tunceli, dans l'est de la Turquie, a été de détruire les murs d'enceinte construits autour de la mairie. Un signe, pour lui, de transparence.

Il a également refusé d'avoir une voiture officielle et a prévu d'afficher les comptes publics de la mairie sur le bâtiment, pour que tous voient comment est dépensé son budget.

Seul maire communiste de Turquie, M. Maçoğlu, âgé de 50 ans, détonne dans un paysage largement dominé depuis 17 ans par l'AKP, le parti islam-conservateur du président Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"Il n'y a rien d'anormal à ce que le public sache ce qu'il se passe", explique-t-il à l'AFP au cours d'un entretien dans son bureau, une longue file de visiteurs attendant devant sa porte ouverte. "Cela ne devrait pas être (perçu comme) une insulte".

Aux élections du 31 mars, M. Maçoğlu a été élu maire à Tunceli, ex-Dersim, dans l'est de la Turquie, une ville kurde alévie foncièrement laïque et de gauche.

Principale minorité religieuse du pays, les Alévis forment un groupe hétérodoxe et progressiste, dont la pratique religieuse est très éloignée de celle des franges traditionnelles de l'islam.

M. Maçoğlu avait déjà été élu maire d'Ovacik, un village de la province de Tunceli, en 2014 pour le Parti communiste de Turquie - qui, marginal, n'a aucun élu au parlement turc. Ses mesures promouvant l'agriculture et les transports publics gratuits y avaient rencontré un franc succès.

Il dit avoir récupéré à Tunceli une municipalité "vidée", aux revenus confisqués. En 2014, la ville avait été remportée par le parti prokurde HDP, mais le gouvernement y a nommé ensuite un administrateur public, comme dans de nombreuses autres municipalités après le putsch manqué de juillet 2016.

Préférant se dire "socialiste" plutôt que "communiste", M. Maçoğlu assure toutefois



Turquie: un maire communiste abat des murs et rebat les cartes © AFP / BULENT KILIC

"viser le communisme" mais estime qu'"à une époque de capitalisme sauvage, être communiste ou être vu comme tel apparaît comme excessif".

MIEL ET POIS-CHICHES BIOS

La région de Tunceli a une longue histoire de résistance de gauche. En 1938, l'armée y a mené une vaste opération visant à mater une rébellion kurde, qui a causé la mort de quelque 13.800 personnes. En 2011, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, alors Premier ministre, avait présenté ses excuses "au nom de l'Etat", une première.

Des points de contrôle militaires ont été installés autour de Tunceli, dont la région a été fortement marquée par le conflit entre les forces armées et le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), un groupe classé "terroriste" par Ankara et ses alliés occidentaux. Ce conflit a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis 1984.

Niant se sentir isolé parce qu'il défend le communisme, M. Maçoğlu dit au contraire recevoir "beaucoup de sympathie" du public. "Si aujourd'hui, même les représentants de la politique bourgeoise parlent de production et de coopératives, c'est une victoire pour nous."

Lors de son mandat à Ovacik, village perché dans les montagnes, il a ouvert une coopérative visant à promouvoir le travail de fermiers produisant du miel et des pois-chiches biologiques. Les revenus dégagés permettaient de financer les études de jeunes issus de familles pauvres.

M. Maçoğlu cherche désormais à étendre ce modèle à travers le pays.

Cihan Durna, employé de la coopérative à Ovacik, vante le modèle mis en place par l'ancien maire. "Nous sommes contents qu'il soutienne la production".

"PAS SUR LA BONNE VOIE"

Senem Yerlikaya, gérante du "Café Cuba" à Ovacik, décrit un sentiment "doux-amer" maintenant que le maire est parti. "Il a fait beaucoup pour les gens ici au cours des cinq dernières années. Les maires sont d'habitude très formels, mais lui s'était bien intégré avec les locaux."

La population locale est globalement contente de M. Maçoğlu: par sa politique, cet homme, marié et père de deux enfants, a permis de faire évoluer la région.

Mahmut Tutan, qui possède un petit hôtel à Ovacik, souvent assimilé aux Alpes suisses, affirme que les touristes sont venus nombreux l'année dernière, grâce au maire. "Il a grandi dans une famille pauvre de cette vallée", explique M. Tutan en pointant du doigt un village au loin. "Un jour, les gens autour de lui lui ont demandé de travailler pour le bien des autres. C'est comme ça que ça a commencé."

Metin Kahraman, chanteur populaire et chercheur travaillant sur l'histoire orale de la région, espère que M. Maçoğlu apportera un "changement positif", décrivant une situation particulière dans cette région "où les Alévis sont majoritaires et respectent leur foi". Selon lui, jusqu'ici, les maires de tous bords ont négligé la culture locale.

Impliqué dans le mouvement communiste depuis les années 1980, M. Maçoğlu assure ne pas avoir de grandes ambitions. Ce qui lui tient le plus à cœur est l'apiculture. "Si vous me demandez si j'ai d'autres projets, je n'en ai vraiment pas."

Interrogé sur la politique actuelle, il se refuse à tout commentaire sur le président Erdogan ou sur le leader du principal parti d'opposition, Kemal Kılıçdaroglu, lui-même de Tunceli.

"Est-ce que les capitalistes, les impérialistes sont sur la bonne voie?", demande-t-il simplement. "Je pense que non". ●

Turquie : perpétuité confirmée pour deux journalistes

Les purges consécutives au coup d'Etat raté de 2016 se poursuivent

ISTANBUL - correspondante

Condamnés à la prison à perpétuité, les journalistes turcs Ahmet Altan et Nazli Ilicak gardaient pourtant espoir. Ils comptaient sur les recours individuels déposés auprès de la Cour constitutionnelle pour entrevoir la fin de leur incarcération, décidée dans le cadre des purges qui ont suivi le coup d'Etat manqué du 15 juillet 2016. Vendredi 3 mai, la plus haute juridiction du pays a tranché en leur défaveur. Neuf juges, sur les quinze qui siègent à la Cour – trois nommés par le Parlement, douze par le président – ont estimé que les autorités turques n'avaient pas attenté à leurs libertés. Ahmet Altan, 69 ans, ancien rédacteur en chef du quotidien *Taraf*, et Nazli Ilicak, 74 ans, journaliste de renom et ancienne députée (1999-2001), vont donc rester en prison.

Arrêtés peu après le coup d'Etat manqué, tous les deux ont été condamnés à la perpétuité pour leur coopération présumée avec



« l'organisation terroriste » du prédicateur Fethullah Gülen, accusé par Ankara d'avoir fomenté le putsch raté. Une collusion assimilée à une « tentative de renversement de l'ordre constitutionnel ».

Court mais sanglant (250 morts), le soulèvement d'une partie de l'armée, le 15 juillet 2016, a servi de prétexte au président Recep Tayyip Erdogan pour mettre la société civile en coupe réglée. Magistrats, universitaires, journalistes ont été condamnés à des peines de prison pour leur collusion présumée avec M. Gülen ou avec les militants autonomistes kurdes du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK).

« Messages subliminaux »

Les arrestations, les procès se succèdent aujourd'hui encore à un rythme soutenu. Les condamnations pleuvent. Vendredi, onze praticiens de l'Union des médecins turcs (TTB) ont été condamnés à vingt mois d'emprisonnement pour avoir protesté publiquement contre l'incursion de l'armée turque dans la région kurde d'Afrin, dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie, en janvier 2018. Une pétition, un Tweet, une déclaration suffisent à envoyer n'importe qui en prison. Les intellectuels surtout.

Les preuves à charge sont souvent absurdes. Ahmet Altan a ainsi été accusé, à l'égal de son frère Mehmet, journaliste et universitaire, d'avoir émis des « messages subliminaux » lors d'un passage à la télévision, la veille de la tentative de coup d'Etat.

Nazli Ilicak se voit reprocher, entre autres, d'avoir partagé « un Tweet favorable au putsch » au lendemain des événements. L'accusation y a vu une grave vio-

lation de la Constitution. En février 2018, un tribunal d'Istanbul avait condamné les trois journalistes à la réclusion à perpétuité « aggravée », c'est-à-dire assortie d'un régime carcéral dur. Seul Mehmet Altan en est sorti, le 27 juin 2018, après un arrêt de la Cour constitutionnelle turque.

Les décisions de la Cour sont à géométrie variable. Autant les dossiers d'accusation se ressemblent, autant les jugements divergent. Vendredi, les juges ont estimé que les droits du journaliste Ali Bulaç, emprisonné 650 jours pour ses liens présumés avec le mouvement Gülen, avaient été violés.

Jeudi, la Cour avait reconnu la violation des libertés individuelles pour Kadri Gürsel, l'ancien chroniqueur du quotidien d'opposition *Cumhuriyet*, et pour Murat Aksoy, journaliste au quotidien *Yeni Hayat*, aujourd'hui fermé. Le même jour, Murat Sabuncu, Akin Atalay, Ahmet Sik et Bülent Utku, tous des anciens employés et journalistes de *Cumhuriyet*, plaidaient eux aussi la violation des libertés individuelles. La Cour les a déboutés. ■

MARIE JÉGO

ISTANBUL, LA DÉFAITE DE TROP POUR ERDOGAN

ÉDITORIAL **M**

Un régime autoritaire qui se sent menacé est prêt à tout. En permettant l'invalidation, mardi 7 mai, de l'élection d'Ekrem Imamoglu, du Parti républicain du peuple (CHP), la principale force de l'opposition, à la mairie du Grand Istanbul, le président Recep Tayyip Erdogan – qui se targue pourtant de tirer sa légitimité du suffrage universel – a franchi un pas de plus dans le mépris ouvert des règles de la démocratie.

Certes, à peine 13 000 voix, sur quelque 10 millions de votants, séparent le vainqueur du scrutin de l'ex-premier ministre Binali Yildirim, candidat de l'AKP (Parti de la justice et du développement), le parti islamiste au pouvoir depuis novembre 2002. Mais les bulletins ont été comptés et re-

comptés. Et le Haut Conseil électoral, qui a annulé le scrutin au prétexte qu'un certain nombre de chefs de bureaux de vote n'étaient pas des fonctionnaires, n'a pas contesté l'élection des maires d'arrondissement qui, elle, a été à l'avantage de l'AKP.

L'annulation d'une élection aussi symbolique que celle d'Istanbul marque un tournant. Cette moitié de la Turquie qui ne se reconnaît pas dans l'autoritarisme pieux, conservateur et nationaliste de Recep Tayyip Erdogan dénonce un véritable putsch électoral. « Il est possible de présenter un candidat contre l'AKP, mais pas de gagner », a résumé Onur Adiguzel, coprésident du CHP.

Ces dernières années, les irrégularités et les fraudes n'ont pas manqué, notamment lors du référendum d'avril 2017 instaurant une république présidentielle, remporté d'une très courte tête par celui que ses partisans appellent le « Rais ». Les résultats ne sont pourtant pas toujours acquis d'avance: le 31 mars, le pouvoir a perdu aussi la capitale Ankara et nombre des grandes villes à l'issue des élections municipales. Une perte d'autant plus cinglante que ces villes étaient, pour la plupart, dirigées par les islamistes depuis un quart de siècle.

Lui-même ancien maire d'Istanbul, M. Erdogan rappelle volontiers que « remporter Istanbul, c'est remporter la Turquie ». Cette défaite dans la cité qui fut son tremplin po-

litique était un camouflet – la défaite de trop. Perdre cette ville qui concentre un bon tiers de la richesse nationale, c'est aussi priver l'AKP de capitaux et de fonds publics précieux pour nourrir entrepreneurs amis et clientèle. Le virage autoritaire et nationaliste de Recep Tayyip Erdogan, arrivé au pouvoir comme libéral et pro-européen, l'a coupé des parties les plus dynamiques du pays. Il riposte en durcissant encore la répression: la confirmation par la Cour constitutionnelle, le 5 mai, de la condamnation à la prison à perpétuité de deux journalistes, Ahmet Altan et Nazli Ilicak, accusés contre toute évidence d'implication dans le putsch militaire raté du 15 juillet 2016, en est un nouveau signe. Depuis 2016, 55 000 personnes ont été arrêtées et plus de 150 000 fonctionnaires limogés.

Le « Rais » veut rejouer le match, comme il l'a fait après les législatives de juin 2015, lorsque son parti a perdu la majorité tout en restant la première force du pays. Six mois plus tard, l'AKP triomphait, sur fond de reprise du conflit avec la rébellion kurde et de chantage au chaos. Les Stambouliotes retourneront aux urnes le 23 juin. L'enjeu est tel, dans une Turquie polarisée comme jamais, que tous les dérapages sont possibles. Mais pour la première fois, l'opposition turque, fragmentée, trouve une figure charismatique autour de laquelle faire bloc: Ekrem Imamoglu, maire éphémère. ■

REUTERS

Turkey-backed Syrian rebels launch attack into Kurdish-held area

May 4, 2019 / BEIRUT/AMMAN (Reuters)

TURKEY-BACKED SYRIAN rebels launched an offensive into territory held by the Kurdish YPG militia north of the Syrian city of Aleppo on Saturday, seizing some territory before heavy shelling forced them to retreat. The operation marked an escalation on one of the most complicated theatres of the multi-sided Syrian war. Though the rebels are targeting the YPG, Syrian government forces are also deployed nearby as are their Russian and Iran-backed allies.

The Turkey-backed Syrian National Army took three villages before withdrawing "because of heavy shelling and the lack of an ability to sweep the area completely in the light of the targeting of our forces", said Yousef Hammoud, its spokesman.

He said pro-Damascus forces had shelled the advancing National Army fighters.

The YPG, which has fought alongside U.S. forces against Islamic State in eastern and northeastern Syria, has lost ground in the northwest since early 2018, when Turkish forces and their Syrian allies drove it from the Afrin region.

A military source in the Afrin Liberation Forces, which is close to the YPG, told Reuters the Turkey-backed rebels had advanced into an area where the Kurdish forces had no presence before being forced out.

"Now, after strikes from our forces, the opposition forces were forced to withdraw from those positions," the source said.

The National Army was formed with Turkish backing from a number of rebel Free Syrian Army groups. Its main foothold is a chunk of territory northeast of Aleppo known as Euphrates Shield that is secured with help from Turkish forces on the ground.

The FSA groups have long vowed to take the YPG-held territory north of



Fighters of National Army, backed by Turkey, stand at a back of a truck in the city of al-Bab, Syria August 5, 2018. REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi/File Photo

Aleppo including the town of Tel Rifaat, taken by the Kurdish militia since 2016.

The Turkish defence ministry said one Turkish soldier was killed and another was wounded in a YPG attack in Tel Rifaat on Saturday.

Turkey views the YPG as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an insurgency on Turkish soil for autonomy in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast since 1984. The PKK is deemed a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

The YPG is the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main Syrian partner of the U.S.-backed coalition against Islamic State. The SDF controls northeastern and eastern Syria, approximately one quarter of the country. ●

REUTERS

Damascus presses Idlib attack, artillery hits Turkish position

May 5, 2019 -Tom Perry, Orhan Coskun (Reuters)

BEIRUT/ANKARA - Syrian government forces and their Russian allies pounded the rebel-held northwest of Syria with air strikes on Saturday, sources in the area said, as artillery hit a Turkish military position there, underlining the risk of wider escalation.

The upsurge in violence in Idlib and nearby areas in the last five days has strained a Russian-Turkish deal that has staved off a government offensive since September. The area is part of the last major foothold of the Syrian rebellion.

Rescue workers in the rebel-held area say dozens of people have been killed and thousands forced to flee by bombardments. The United Nations has said the attacks have included the worst use of barrel bombs in 15 months.

The Turkish defence ministry said two Turkish soldiers were lightly wounded by the shelling, which was believed to have been launched from Syrian government-held territory.

Turkish troops have deployed in the northwest in agreement with Russia, President Bashar al-Assad's most powerful ally.

Assad, who has defeated many of his enemies aided by Russian and Iranian firepower, has vowed to recover every inch of Syria.

But the presence of Turkish forces in the northwest and Russian understandings with Ankara have complicated any offensive into the region, home to some 3 million people.

Turkey, already hosting 3.6 million Syrian refugees and hoping to avoid another influx, has established a dozen military positions in Idlib and nearby areas in agreement with Russia.

The Turkish defence ministry said the soldiers wounded in Saturday's shelling were sent to Turkey for treatment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last week he did not rule out Syrian forces, backed by Russian air power, launching a full-scale assault on militants in Idlib, but such an operation was impractical for now.

Syrian state media say government forces are attacking jihadists in the northwest. State news agency SANA said the army had destroyed jihadist positions in southern Idlib and nearby Hama province on Saturday, in response to what it called repeated violations of a de-escalation agreement.

But the U.N. regional humanitarian coordinator has said schools, health facilities and residential areas have been hit and the government forces are employing the worst barrel bombing in at least 15 months.

Barrel bombs are containers packed with explosives dropped from helicopters.

HEAVIER BOMBARDMENT

A rebel spokesman said government attempts to advance into the Qalaat al-Madiq area had been repelled. Rebels were shelling government positions, added Naji Mustafa of the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) rebel grouping.

After an overnight lull, the bombardment escalated again on Saturday, said Ahmad al-Dbis, safety and security manager for the U.S.-based Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM), which supports medical facilities in the area.

"Now the bombing has returned and is much heavier and has spread very widely in Jabal al-Zawiya and rural northern Hama. The planes are not stopping at all and the bombing is continuing in a very big way →

→ like yesterday and worse,” he added.

The Syrian Civil Defense, a rescue service operating in rebel-held areas, said it had recorded more than 30 deaths in the last few days. Dbis said the number of dead was at least 50, while the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which reports on the war, said at least 67 people had been killed.

Hundreds of vehicles have been arriving every day in the town of Atmeh at the Turkish border, ferrying people away from the targeted areas, an Atmeh resident contacted by Reuters said.

Mustafa al-Haj Yousef, the Civil Defense director for Idlib, said more than

130,000 people had fled towards more secure areas, adding: “Civil Defense centres have been targeted directly.”

UOSSM says four medical facilities have been bombed.

Russia’s deal with Turkey demanded the creation of a demilitarised zone free of all heavy weapons and jihadists. But Moscow says the agreement has not been implemented.

The most powerful faction in the northwest is Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist movement that emerged from the Nusra Front, formerly al Qaeda’s official Syrian affiliate. Its influence has grown as it has snuffed out rival groups. But other factions operating under the NLF umbrella still have a presence.●

The Arab Weekly May 5, 2019

US Brotherhood designation could throw a spanner in Turkish game in Syria

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

Syrrians on both sides of the conflict are waiting to see whether US President Donald Trump will designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a “terrorist organisation,” something he has been toying with for more than two years.

Authorities in Damascus would undoubtedly welcome the Trump decision but remain silent, unable to praise the US president after his decision on the Golan Heights. So is the Syrian opposition but for different reasons.

The Brotherhood is strongly represented on the Turkey-backed Syrian National Coalition, which is positioned to take part in the forthcoming constitutional committee within the context of the UN-mandated Geneva peace process.

The Iranians have condemned the Trump decision – much to the displeasure of their allies in Damascus.

If the Brotherhood is sanctioned, it becomes technically difficult for any US official to meet with the Syrian opposition, unless Brotherhood members are expelled. If they are asked to leave the Syrian coalition, that would upset their financial backers in Turkey and Qatar, costing them money that they are eager to receive.

If the Brotherhood is squeezed out of the Geneva process, its members could try to disrupt it.

Throughout the past eight years, the Brotherhood has been the most well-organised and coherent political group in the Syrian opposition, with a clear vision, hierarchy and programme. Few politicians can afford a confrontation with the Brotherhood on one front and with

the regime on another.

Although media focus is on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, the province is historically a hotbed for the Syrian Brotherhood. This is where the group nourished in the 1960s and 1970s, creating underground cells that outlived the Brotherhood’s 1982 exodus from Syria.

The older generation of Idlib notables is strongly affiliated with the Brotherhood and so are their children and grandchildren, who are carrying arms with HTS or the Islamic State (ISIS) now, for lack of better alternative. With ease, the Brotherhood could make a visible comeback in Idlib, carrying arms to combat HTS, with full backing from Turkey.

A second option is to cuddle up to the Russians, who neither sanction the Brotherhood nor consider it a terrorist organisation. It agreed to join the Sochi conference of January 2018 and has been supportive of the Russian-Turkish-Iranian-led talks at Astana.

This would play out nicely for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who enjoys an excellent working relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and has long wanted to usher the Brotherhood into the political process – more so today than ever, after losing his allies in Egypt and Sudan, and being on the verge of losing them in Libya as well.

It can then be slowly injected into the Russian-led, US-abandoned political process, perhaps after giving it a facelift, with a new name and a new identity. That would require the cooperation of Damascus and amending of its 2011 political party law, which prohibits any party from operating within the Syrian framework, if carrying a religious agenda.

The Syrian government sees zero reason to accommodate the Brotherhood, unable to forget or forgive its attempts at seizing power in the 1960s and in 1982. Extensive Russian lobbying is needed but there are limits as to how far the Russian



Steely gaze. US President Donald Trump (L) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan at NATO headquarters in Brussels, last July. (Reuters)

can talk the Syrians into accepting the Brotherhood, which, by Syrian law, is considered a terrorist organisation. Any contact or membership is a capital offence in the Syrian legal system.

When Erdogan tried to push for the Muslim Brotherhood’s empowerment in 2011, during the final stages of his honeymoon with the Syrians, he got a very cold shoulder in Damascus. Interestingly, the Russians don’t mind dealing with the Brotherhood, nor do the Iranians, who have condemned the Trump decision – much to the displeasure of their allies in Damascus.

A third option would be for the Americans to continue dealing with the Brotherhood members as individuals, not as part of an outlawed organisation, like they did with the Palestine Liberation Organisation at the start of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. This is something Erdogan might try to peddle to Trump, to keep his proxies on the Syrian constitutional committee, when they meet in July.

One month after being inaugurated, Trump raised the issue of sanctioning the Muslim Brotherhood and former US Secretary of State

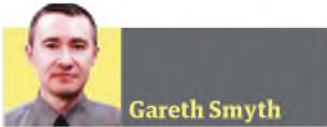
Rex Tillerson said the group was affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Some members of the Syrian Brotherhood were, indeed, affiliated with al-Qaeda. Fleeing persecution at home, after failing to seize power in 1982, many headed to Pakistan and later to Afghanistan, where they were recruited by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian founder of al-Qaeda. They reported to him until his 1989 assassination, then to Osama bin Laden and to current chief Ayman Zawahiri.

After 9/11, Damascus sent piles of intelligence that the Syrians had gathered over the years about Brotherhood members who joined al-Qaeda, which were put at the disposal of the FBI.

One of them, Abou Khaled al-Souri, was a main commander in the Syrian battlefield, until he was assassinated by ISIS in 2014. Another, Abu Musaab al-Souri – the spiritual godfather of HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) – was arrested in Pakistan in 2005 and extradited to Syria, where he remains in custody.

Momentum for Kurdish independence stalled but is not finished



Gareth Smyth

Momentum for a separate Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan has stalled since the September 2017 independence referendum but has it disappeared? Relations between the Kurds and Baghdad are improving but fragile.

Internally, the two main Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – remain at odds. Despite the unified Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), each party controls a separate zone.

The parties' energies seem to be going largely into internal wrangling. Since September's parliamentary election in Iraqi Kurdistan, they have been battling over how to choose a KRG president and over how many vice-presidents there should be. The likelihood is that the KDP's Nechirvan Barzani will be president and his cousin Masrour Barzani will be prime minister.

Nonetheless, the idea of greater independence persists and has supporters in Europe and the United States. Kurdish universities are promoting overseas links and, in October, the University of Kurdistan Hewler (UKH) will be the site of an international conference, "The KRG's Emerging Strategy for Stability in Iraq and the Region," to help "stabilise a dysfunctional country."

The conference co-ordinator is Bryan Gibson of Hawaii Pacific University. His 2015 book "Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds and the Cold War" focused on Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish nationalist leader whose war with Baghdad ended with defeat in 1975.

Gibson said that when he arrived in northern Iraq for the first time in 2016 for another UKH conference, he made "a sort of pilgrimage" to Barzani's grave in Barzan, the clan's mountainous homeland near Turkey.

"When you travel around Kurdistan, it's not what you'd expect for a country torn apart by war," he said.

Nor is this purely economic development. "Sitting in a cafe, I felt I could leave my iPhone, laptop and wallet, walk around the block, come back and they would still be there. I can't do that in Washington DC, Seattle or Toronto," Gibson said.

Gibson said decentralised politics in his native Canada could offer Iraq one example, although it would require greater understanding between Kurds and Arabs.

"Apart from the politicians who go down to Baghdad for politics in the Green Zone, they don't interact," he said. "When the Mosul crisis [seized by the Islamic State in 2014] happened, Arabs were allowed into Kurdistan as a safe haven and given opportunities to set up businesses... For a lot of these people, it's the first time they've ever actually lived in civility."

Gibson floated a notion of Iraq as "four decentralised states or provinces: the [predominately Sunni] Kurds, [Arab] Sunnis and

[Arab] Shias would have an ethnic territory of their own and then a fourth province would cover Baghdad, which is more diverse."

Revenue would be raised centrally and distributed per capita to the "states." The central government would control defence, and each "state" its own police.

Gibson conceded that US actions exacerbated Kurdish-Arab tensions. "It was smart for the Kurds to align themselves with the US before and after the invasion but there's no question... [this] alienated those who saw the US as a colonial power," he said. "From a North American perspective, colonialism is far removed, they threw off the shackles of British colonials in the 1700s."

Even more contentious is the Kurds' relationship with Israel.

"This goes back to 1962," said Gibson. "It's wink-wink, nudge-nudge but everyone knows it exists. The IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] and the Mossad have played a role helping Kurdish security forces."



Hopes and challenges. Bryan Gibson, of Hawaii Pacific University, poses for a photo in the Iraqi city of Erbil. (Courtesy of Bryan Gibson)

Historically, Gibson said, Israel used the Kurds "to tie down the Arab armies in Iraq, which worked well in [Arab-Israeli wars of] '67

"I don't think the desire for independence has waned."

**Bryan Gibson,
Hawaii Pacific
University**

and '73." Since the Kurds established autonomy after the 1990-91 Gulf War, "there's been a lot of Israeli investment building up their technology and communications," he said. Israel backed the 2017 independence referendum. "Those relationships are etched in stone," said Gibson.

Given that the referendum led not to independence but to lost territory, including Kirkuk, will the Kurds take a pragmatic course?

"I don't think the desire for independence has waned," said Gibson. "What changed is the Kurdish government got a bloody nose. They were reminded that the push for independence would not be easy."

Gibson said he can imagine a future "more pliable government in Iran" giving Iraqi Kurds access to the sea but noted that Tehran, like Ankara, opposes independence.

Hence, he said, "The only way to the sea is through Baghdad" and that Kurdish leaders have made a "turn south." They have "leverage," he said, through controlling river headwaters. Potential irrigation and electricity-generation require both technology and political cooperation.

"Israeli irrigation techniques are some of the world's best," he said. "They have innovations that, if applied to Iraq, would be beneficial. Many people in Iraq would not want that unless it was surreptitiously provided through the Kurds."

Gareth Smyth is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He has reported from the Middle East since 1992.

L'avenir du Proche-Orient se joue en Iran



Pierre Prier
6 mai 2019
<https://orientxxi.info>

Quarante ans après la révolution, l'Iran reste l'objet de fantasmes, et même de détestation de la part des gouvernements américain et israélien. Pour ceux qui ne se contentent pas des clichés — entre « le pays des mollahs » et « l'ennemi de l'Occident » —, trois livres récents ouvrent les portes de la République islamique : le récit d'un voyage très personnel par un jeune journaliste franco-iranien, un petit dictionnaire allègre et érudit répondant à toutes les questions, y compris les plus saugrenues, et un coup de projecteur sur cet enjeu géostratégique majeur qu'est le détroit d'Ormuz, haut lieu de l'affrontement entre l'Iran et les États-Unis.

« Éteignez tout. Oubliez tout. Préparez-vous à danser, rire et pleurer. Vous allez vivre une expérience iranienne. » Le journaliste franco-iranien Armin Arefi déroule sous cet exergue ambitieux un récit à la première personne : le retour dans le pays de ses parents, exilés en France avant sa naissance. Armin Arefi n'avait pas pu remettre les pieds en Iran depuis juillet 2007. Correspondant à Téhéran pour plusieurs médias français de 2005 à 2007, sous la présidence de Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, il s'était vu retirer son accréditation par le ministère de la culture et de l'orientation islamique, puis avait dû quitter le pays. Dans un précédent livre paru en 2009, Dentelles et tchador, il revenait sur ces deux années en décrivant des réalités de la société iranienne, en particulier les mille et un stratagèmes d'une partie de la jeunesse pour échapper aux interdits religieux.

L'ouvrage lui avait fermé les portes de la République islamique pour longtemps, écrit Arefi. Le journaliste avait pourtant cru à une ouverture quand il avait été convoqué à l'ambassade iranienne à Paris pour « remettre son livre à Son Excellence Monsieur l'ambassadeur ». Lequel avait jeté les yeux sur la couverture, représentant deux jeunes Iraniennes au foulard tombant, esquissant un pas de danse. « Monsieur Arefi, avait lancé le diplomate, ce n'est pas parce que vous êtes jeune et binationnel que vous pouvez ainsi pisser sur la République islamique » !

UNE JEUNESSE EN QUÊTE DE LIBERTÉ

Sept ans plus tard, en 2016, Armin Arefi passe le contrôle de police de l'aéroport de Téhéran avec son passeport iranien ; les temps ont changé. Sous le président Hassan Rohani,

l'Iran cherche à s'ouvrir au monde. Les Iraniens entrent en ouverture au monde grâce à l'accord sur le nucléaire conclu en 2015 à Vienne entre l'Iran, les cinq membres permanents du conseil de sécurité de l'ONU, l'Allemagne et l'Union européenne, qui sera dénoncé par Donald Trump.

Les choses ont-elles changé dans la vie de tous les jours ? Oui et non, selon l'auteur. Son premier contact à l'aéroport, c'est une vendeuse de fast-food interloquée : « Pourquoi êtes-vous venu en Iran ? Vous êtes fou, on essaie tous de partir. » La répression de la révolte de 2009 contre la réélection du président Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a laissé nombre de jeunes dans un état de résignation morose. Les pesanteurs institutionnelles, le poids des réseaux économiques liés au pouvoir qui briment les initiatives, la pression sociale sont toujours présents dans cet itinéraire au gré des rencontres.

Si la 4G omniprésente permet de multiplier les contacts et les aventures sur la messagerie en ligne Telegram avec ses 20 millions d'abonnés, dans ce pays où 70 % de la population a moins de 35 ans, la pression familiale est toujours forte. Des ambiguïtés rassemblées en un lieu, le pont de Tabiat, à Téhéran, long de 270 mètres, inauguré en 2014, et où se promène le soir toute une société en mouvement, faute d'autres lieux publics de détente.

MOURIR POUR LA SYRIE ?

Il y a des jeunes filles qui font des selfies en rejetant leur voile, poursuivies par des dragueurs adolescents, et aussi des porteuses de tchador elles aussi hypnotisées par leur téléphone portable. Des garçons qui disent se moquer de la religion et d'autres qui font leur prière. Mais le journaliste franco-iranien constate aussi la résistance du patriarcat et l'emprise de la famille. En Iran une jeune femme non mariée ne peut habiter seule, dit-il, même si elle jette son voile par-dessus les canapés lors de soirées alcoolisées comme celle, plutôt lugubre, décrite au début du récit.

Le livre ouvre d'autres portes de la réalité iranienne, comme avec cette visite à la section 50 du plus grand cimetière de la capitale, réservée au corps d'élite des pasdarans, les Gardiens de la révolution ; on s'y presse autour des sépultures des combattants tombés en Syrie, où ils avaient été envoyés soutenir le régime de Bachar Al-Assad. Un entretien avec le fondateur historique de cette force, devenu homme d'affaires, éclaire le pouvoir des pasdarans dans l'économie, l'homme se vantant de représenter en Iran une société française spécialisée dans l'aéronautique et le matériel de défense.



Un printemps à Téhéran, photo de couverture.

Le peuple, lui souffre des restrictions imposées par les sanctions américaines, mais aussi, selon un professeur d'université de « l'absence de gestion et [des] vols importants dont souffre l'économie iranienne ». Dans le sud, loin de la capitale, on se plaint des prix des aliments, multipliés par trois, de la pénurie de médicaments, de la monnaie qui dégringole, et on râle contre le pouvoir qui « ferait mieux d'investir dans le pays au lieu d'envoyer des soldats à l'étranger ». Là aussi, on entretient le rêve impossible d'envoyer ses enfants étudier à l'étranger. Au terme de ses tribulations, Armin Arefi repartira avec des sentiments mitigés, entre l'impression d'avoir rencontré une « société jeune et brillante » qui « avance, doucement, mais sûrement, pour forger son destin, à l'abri de toute guerre ou violence » et « pousse les mollahs à accepter le progrès » (on passera sur la comparaison plus que contestable avec l'Arabie saoudite où, selon l'auteur le prince héritier tenterait au contraire de « tirer vers le haut » une société « globalement conservatrice »).

Le lecteur désireux d'acquérir des connaissances de base pourra lire avec profit L'Iran en cent questions, de Mohammad-Reza Djalili, professeur émérite à l'institut de hautes études internationales et du développement de Genève, et Thierry Kellner, maître de conférence au département de sciences politiques de l'Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB). De « Pourquoi Napoléon s'est-il intéressé à la Perse ? » à « Iran-Arabie saoudite : une nouvelle guerre froide ? » en passant par « Existe-t-il une société civile en Iran ? », ce livre didactique, précis et agréable à lire éclaire la complexité iranienne en la divisant en huit thématiques : histoire, société, système politique, culture, religion, questions géopolitiques, économie et relation France-Iran. Le chapitre sur le « malaise de la jeunesse » fait écho au livre du reporter franco-iranien.

Outre le poids des interdits et du patriarcat, les jeunes Iraniens souffrent, malgré les efforts du gouvernement en faveur de l'éducation, du manque de débouchés dans l'économie du pays. « On estime que chaque année de 150 à 180 000 diplômés quittent le pays. Parfois près de 100 % des promotions de master des meilleures institutions universitaires vont faire carrière à l'étranger. » Les nouvelles sanctions américaines n'arrangeront pas les choses et laissent ➤

► pour l'instant sans réponse ce qui pourrait être la cent unième question de ce livre très riche : quel avenir pour la révolution islamique, qui vient de fêter ses quarante ans ?

LA MENACE DE FERMETURE DU DÉTROIT D'ORMUZ

Les nouvelles incertitudes créées par le retrait américain du traité sur le nucléaire se concentrent autour d'un point géographique : le détroit d'Ormuz, l'étroite entrée du Golfe persique, contrôlé par l'Iran d'un côté et le Sultanat d'Oman de l'autre, et par où transite 90 % du pétrole produit dans la région. Une position stratégique évidemment tentante. « L'Iran peut-il réellement fermer le détroit d'Ormuz ? » demande le chapitre 67. Techniquement, les possibilités sont multiples, nous disent les auteurs : attaques de navires par les vedettes rapides des Gardiens de la révolution, pose de mines, missiles anti-navires tirés à partir des côtes. Téhéran brandit parfois cette menace comme un élément de dissuasion, tout en sachant bien que son exécution déclencherait une guerre contre la puissance avec qui elle est en confrontation

directe autour du détroit : les États-Unis, protecteurs des États pétroliers arabes de l'autre rive et du trafic maritime passant par la porte du Golfe.

C'est pourquoi l'Iran manie cette menace avec parcimonie et de façon rhétorique, principalement pour rappeler sa souveraineté sur le détroit, rappelle Léa Michelis dans L'Iran et le détroit d'Ormuz : « Il faut s'intéresser plus la manière dont la menace est utilisée qu'à la manière dont elle va être exécutée », affirme-t-elle dans cet ouvrage issu d'un mémoire soutenu en juillet 2018 à Sciences Po Aix-en-Provence.

Pour bien comprendre l'importance du lieu pour l'Iran, il faut remonter à l'héritage lointain de la Perse antique, qui contrôlait les deux rives, souvenir qui pèse toujours sur la vision stratégique de Téhéran. Au cœur du nationalisme iranien, Ormuz est aussi, écrit Léa Michelis, le pivot d'une stratégie iranienne qui regarde au-delà du Proche-Orient, vers l'Inde et la Chine : « Ce sont les diverses possibilités qu'offre le détroit à l'Iran en termes de développement économique et com-

mercial, de partenariats de défense, de relations diplomatiques qui font du détroit un véritable atout de la puissance iranienne. »

Les deux grandes puissances asiatiques ne verraient toutefois pas d'un bon œil une fermeture du Golfe. « In fine, nuance dans sa préface Clément Therme, chercheur pour le programme Moyen-Orient de l'International Institute for Strategic Studies (ISS) de Londres, cet ouvrage démontre qu'en dépit d'une situation stratégique favorable d'un pays carrefour, l'Iran n'est pas parvenu à réaliser le potentiel lié à cette position géographique exceptionnelle. » En cause, « la dimension révolutionnaire de la politique régionale de la République islamique », mais aussi « l'hostilité institutionnalisée avec les États-Unis » depuis la dénonciation par Donald Trump de l'accord de Vienne. ●

Pierre Prier, Journaliste. Son premier contact avec le Proche-Orient date de 1987, avec la première intifada. Il a quitté Le Figaro après 21 ans passés à couvrir le Proche-Orient et l'Afrique.



6 mai 2019

Turquie. Le chef kurde Öcalan rencontre des avocats pour la 1re fois en huit ans

Istanbul, 6 mai 2019 (AFP) —
www.ouest-france.fr

Le chef historique de la rébellion kurde Abdullah Öcalan, qui purge une peine de prison à vie en Turquie, a rencontré des avocats pour la première fois depuis 2011, ont indiqué ses défenseurs ce lundi.

Lors d'une conférence de presse à Istanbul, en Turquie, ce lundi 6 mai, les avocats d'Abdullah Öcalan ont annoncé avoir rencontré leur client pour la première fois. Ils ont aussi relayé un message de sa part exhortant ses partisans en grève de la faim à ne pas mettre leur vie en danger par leur action.

La rencontre entre le chef historique de la rébellion kurde et deux de ses avocats a eu lieu le 2 mai dans l'île-prison d'Imrallı, non loin d'Istanbul, où il est incarcéré, ont-ils précisé. « C'est sa première rencontre avec des avocats depuis 2011. Elle a duré environ une heure », a déclaré l'un des avocats qui l'a rencontré, Rezan Sarica, lors d'une conférence de presse à Istanbul. « Seulement deux avocats ont été autorisés à le rencontrer même si quatre en ont fait la demande », a-t-il ajouté.

Des centaines de prisonniers en grève de la faim



Les avocats d'Öcalan, Faik Ozgur Erol, Nevroz Uysal, Rezan Sarica. | AFP / BULENT KILIC

Malgré un isolement quasi-total, Abdullah Öcalan reste une figure de référence pour la rébellion kurde en Turquie, où le conflit avec l'État a fait plus de 40 000 morts depuis 1984.

Selon le parti prokurde HDP, quelque 3 000 prisonniers sont actuellement en grève de la faim pour réclamer l'assouplissement des conditions de sa détention, la plupart ayant rejoint le mouvement ces dernières semaines par solidarité avec une députée prokurde, Leyla Güven, qui refuse de s'alimenter depuis novembre dernier.

Par ailleurs, huit personnes se sont suicidées en prison depuis le début du mouvement, selon le HDP.

« Leur état de santé physique et psychologique prime »

« Nous respectons la résistance de nos amis dans les prisons et en dehors mais nous souhaitons qu'ils ne la portent pas à un stade mettant leur vie en danger ou entraînant leur mort », a indiqué une autre avocate, Nevroz Uysal, relayant un message d'Abdullah Öcalan lors de la conférence de presse.

« Pour nous, leur état de santé

physique et psychologique prime sur toute autre considération », a-t-elle ajouté. « Un règlement politique honorable et démocratique est primordial pour nous ».

Depuis la reprise du conflit dans le sud-est de la Turquie en 2015 après la rupture d'un fragile cessez-le-feu, le discours du président Recep Tayyip Erdogan au sujet des rebelles kurdes s'est nettement durci, faisant s'éloigner la perspective d'une solution politique négociée au conflit.

Son frère lui a aussi rendu visite

Le frère d'Abdullah Öcalan, Mehmet, a pu lui rendre visite à la mi-janvier pour la première fois depuis 2016 à la faveur d'un geste d'apaisement consenti par les autorités après le lancement du mouvement de grève de la faim par des prisonniers en signe de protestation contre son isolement.

Abdullah Öcalan, alors en cavale depuis 1980, a été capturé le 15 février 1999 par des agents turcs au Kenya. Il a été condamné à mort le 29 juin 1999 pour trahison et tentative de diviser la Turquie mais sa peine a été commuée en 2002 en réclusion à perpétuité, après l'abolition de la peine de mort en Turquie. ●

À Istanbul, un nouveau vote est convoqué et la victoire de l'opposition annulée

Le président turc a multiplié les pressions pour que soit invalidé le scrutin municipal du 31 mars dernier.

DELPHINE MINOUI  @DelphineMinoui
CORRESPONDANTE À ISTANBUL

TURQUIE Le Haut comité électoral a fini par trancher. Après des semaines de consultations, l'YSK, l'instance turque en charge de superviser le processus électoral, a annoncé, lundi soir, l'annulation des résultats du scrutin du 31 mars à Istanbul et la tenue d'un nouveau vote. «L'YSK a décidé d'annuler et de renouveler l'élection pour la métropole d'Istanbul», énonce froidement une dépêche de l'agence turque Anadolu. Une décision qui va dans le sens des dernières déclarations du président Recep Tayyip Erdogan : «*Mes concitoyens me disent : "Mon président, il faut renouveler cette élection" (...) Venez, allons au-devant du peuple et ce que dictera la volonté populaire, nous l'accepterons. C'est aussi simple que cela*», avait-il ouvertement déclaré ce week-end lors d'une rencontre avec les représentants d'une association patronale. Selon la télévision turque NTV, le gouverneur d'Istanbul va mandater un maire par intérim dans l'attente du nouveau scrutin, qui se tiendra le 23 juin.

Cette décision est un coup dur pour l'opposition. En dépit d'un musellement de la presse et des pressions endurées, le candidat anti-Erdogan, Ekrem Imamoglu, était parvenu à sortir la tête haute du scrutin avec quelque 13 000 voix d'avance sur le candidat de la Coalition menée par l'AKP et les ultranationalistes du MHP, l'ex-premier ministre Binali Yildirim. Dès sa victoire, le nouveau maire s'était distingué par ses discours inclusifs, en opposition à la politique polarisatrice des partisans du président. Mais ces derniers n'ont pas digéré leur revers dans cette ville hautement symbolique pour Erdogan. C'est ici même, à Istanbul, que l'homme fort du pays entama véritablement sa carrière politique en tant que maire en 1994. Pour lui, la perte de l'ex-Constantinople constitue également une perte financière, l'AKP perdant sa prise directe sur les marchés publics qui y sont liés et qui profitent aux hommes d'affaires qui gravitent dans sa sphère.

Evoquant des irrégularités, le duo AKP-MHP s'est ainsi empressé de récla-



«*Mes concitoyens me disent : "Mon président, il faut renouveler cette élection." (...) Venez, allons au-devant du peuple et ce que dictera la volonté populaire, nous l'accepterons*», a déclaré, ce week-end, Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

mer, dans un premier temps, un recomptage à Istanbul et Ankara. Mais la victoire confirmée d'Imamoglu l'a ensuite poussé à déposer plusieurs recours extraordinaires auprès du Haut comité électoral dans l'espoir de faire annuler le vote d'Istanbul et d'organiser de nouvelles élections.

« Une parodie »

Jeudi, les médias locaux faisaient ainsi part de l'ouverture, par la police, de plus de 30 enquêtes distinctes dans trois districts. Plus de cent présidents de bureaux de vote et assesseurs ont ainsi été convoqués et interrogés en tant que suspects. Ils sont accusés d'avoir minimisé le nombre de voix remportées par les candidats de la Coalition du pouvoir ou d'avoir indûment

de bureaux de vote et la mouvance de Fetullah Gülen, l'instigateur présumé du putsch raté du 15 juillet 2016.

Tandis que le verdict de la Commission électorale se faisait attendre, le vainqueur de l'opposition, Ekrem Imamoglu avait néanmoins pris ses fonctions à la tête de la municipalité, n'hésitant pas à accuser l'AKP d'être «*un mauvais perdant*». Dans un discours prononcé ce lundi soir, quelques heures après le verdict, devant une foule compacte, il s'est efforcé de redonner le moral à ses supporters. «*Nous avons soif de justice, nous sommes la jeune génération turque qui croit en la démocratie (...) Personne ne doit pleurer. Nous sommes là, nous allons travailler ensemble*», a-t-il promis, fidèle à son calme.

Faisant écho à la contestation du verdict de la Commission électorale par l'opposition, de petits attroupements se sont improvisés, ce lundi soir, et un concert de casseroles et de poêles a défié la nuit dans certains quartiers anti-Erdogan : une manière de signifier à l'AKP que la fronde reste au rendez-vous et que le nouveau scrutin n'est pas gagné d'avance... Sauf fraude évidente de la part du pouvoir, dans un pays où la démocratie ne cesse de reculer. «*L'annulation du scrutin d'Istanbul n'est pas seulement une parodie mais démontre qu'il n'existe aucune institution en Turquie qu'Erdogan ne domine ou ne contrôle*», estime ce lundi soir le spécialiste de la Turquie, Henri Barkey, sur son compte Twitter. ■

15 000

voix

L'avance obtenue par le candidat anti-Erdogan, Ekrem Imamoglu, lors des élections municipales à Istanbul

comptabilisé comme nuls des votes valides. À la thèse d'irrégularités s'est également greffée celle de l'implication de «*groupes terroristes*» dans le processus électoral. Ce dimanche, l'agence Anadolu annonçait ainsi qu'une enquête judiciaire aurait établi un lien entre 43 responsables



8 Mai 2019

Turquie: l'illusion démocratique tombe à Istanbul

L'autorité électorale a annulé le résultat des municipales de la ville lundi, poussée par l'AKP du président Erdogan. Ekrem Imamoglu, le vainqueur de l'opposition, parle de «trahison».

Par
JÉRÉMIE BERLIOUX
Correspondant à Istanbul

C'est à sept voix contre quatre que le Haut Conseil électoral (YSK) turc a décidé lundi d'ordonner l'organisation de nouvelles élections municipales à Istanbul. Ekrem Imamoglu, candidat vainqueur de l'opposition, n'aura donc occupé le fauteuil de maire d'Istanbul, cœur de l'activité économique du pays, que quelques semaines. Suffisamment pour faire croire un moment qu'en Turquie, l'alternance politique peut se faire normalement.

Cette décision du YSK ébranle un peu plus la confiance de millions d'électeurs dans le processus électoral. Bien que le Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) a toujours clamé son attachement à la démocratie grâce aux élections, son insistance à rejouer le scrutin à Istanbul écorne «l'option d'une transition pacifique du pouvoir à travers des élections», selon Halil Gürhanli, spécialiste des populismes et de la vie politique turque à l'université d'Helsinki. Depuis de nombreuses années, l'AKP, le parti du Président, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, est critiqué pour l'affaiblissement progressif des institutions démocratiques, transformant le pays en un régime autoritaire.

«**Coup d'Etat**». Parmi les arguments évoqués pour demander l'annulation des ré-

sultats, qui se sont joués à quelques milliers de voix près, il y a notamment celui selon lequel certains présidents de bureaux de vote n'étaient pas des fonctionnaires, ce qui est contraire à la loi. Or ce sont ces mêmes présidents qui

avaient été validés par le YSK, dont les membres sont en partie nommés par Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Ces présidents ont supervisé les élections des maires d'arrondissement et des conseils municipaux, toutes deux remportées par l'AKP. Elles n'ont pas été contestées ni annulées. De quoi faire dire à Ahmet Sik, député du parti pro-kurde HDP sur Twitter: «6 mai 2019, à nouveau il y a un coup d'Etat en Turquie». La décision du YSK fait tomber le voile sur la fonction réelle des élections en Turquie. «La population n'accepterait pas un dirigeant non élu. Mais le pays abrite un autoritarisme compétitif, à savoir un régime autoritaire entretenant une apparence de démocratie», avance Howard Eissenstat, assistant professeur à

l'université St. Lawrence, dans l'Etat de New York, membre du Project on Middle East Democracy. Perdre Istanbul est certes une défaite symbolique pour Erdogan, qui en a été maire en 1994. Mais c'est surtout la perte du cœur des réseaux clientélistes, base de la vie politique turque, qui aurait motivé le pouvoir à prendre cette décision.

«Istanbul est une source gigantesque de revenus pour les cercles restreints de l'AKP», continue Howard Eissenstat. Les partis turcs fonctionnent différemment qu'ailleurs. Le chef concentre tous les pouvoirs et redistribue les bénéfices de ses réseaux clientélistes. Pour cette raison, une fronde au sein de l'AKP est peu probable. Les frondeurs

L'HISTOIRE DU JOUR



Des militants pro-Imamoglu, maire d'Istanbul depuis quelques semaines, après l'annonce de l'annulation de l'élection, lundi. PHOTO AFP

devraient avoir suffisamment de réseaux, un accès aux médias (verrouillés) et rassembler plus de 10 % des électeurs pour entrer au Parlement. L'agitation de personnalités, tel l'ancien Premier ministre Ahmet Davutoglu ou encore l'ex-président Abdullah Gül, est le symptôme d'un malaise au sein de l'AKP.

«Après seize ans au pouvoir, le parti souffre d'usure. Au sein de la base, certains critiquent la direction tant pour des raisons démocratiques qu'à cause de la gestion de l'économie», souligne Howard Eissenstat. Le pays est en récession, l'inflation frôle les 20 % et le nombre de chômeurs ne cesse d'augmenter.

Dilemme. Ce nouveau vote ne devrait pas changer la configuration du jeu politique turc. Le parti ultranationaliste MHP continue de profiter de son alliance avec l'AKP. De même pour l'alliance de l'opposition turque (kémalistes du CHP et nationalistes de l'IP), bénéficiant du soutien tacite du Parti démocratique des peuples (HDP). Plusieurs formations, dont le Parti communiste de Turquie et le Parti de la félicité, islamiste, ont annoncé leur ralliement à un Imamoglu galvanisant les foules.

Lundi soir, ce dernier a exhorté ses sympathisants à ne pas perdre espoir: «Nous avons soif de justice, nous sommes la jeunesse turque qui croit en la démocratie. Les décideurs de ce pays sont peut-être dans l'ignorance, l'erreur ou même la trahison mais nous n'abandonnerons jamais.» Erdogan ne peut cependant pas prendre le risque de perdre à nouveau. «Il faut s'attendre à une augmentation de la violence et de la criminalisation de l'opposition», note Gürhanli. Plusieurs présidents de bureaux de vote sont déjà sous le coup d'enquête pour appartenance à une organisation terroriste. «Une nouvelle défaite affaiblirait considérablement», ajoute-t-il.

Cette «crise d'Istanbul» met le pouvoir face à un dilemme. Prendre le risque de paraître affaibli voire laisser s'échapper une partie de ses réseaux, mais garder son apparence démocratique. Ou piétiner le jeu électoral, quitte à pousser l'opposition à ne plus croire en une potentielle alternance pacifique. «Si l'opposition perd cette confiance et ne joue plus le jeu, la Turquie deviendra beaucoup moins stable, et plus difficile à gouverner», assure Howard Eissenstat. ◆

REUTERS

No turning back: Syrian Kurds reshape region with books and schools

May 6, 2019 QAMISHLI, Syria / Ellen Francis (Reuters) -

WHEN Eyub Mohamad was a boy, security forces beat his father into paralysis. His offence was typing leaflets in Kurdish, banned under Syria's ruling Baath party.

Mohamad, with his family, fed and bathed his father for years. Wary of the typewriter that landed his father in interrogation rooms, he avoided learning to read his own language.

"I never saw my dad walking," he said. "Till his last day, he believed he would get up for this cause."

Mohamad's father died in 2011, the year Syria's conflict began. He did not see Kurdish fighters carve out autonomous rule across north and east Syria. He did not see his son, now 34, become a teacher at a Kurdish school in the city of Qamishli on the border with Turkey.

Kurdish leaders now hold about a quarter of Syria, the biggest chunk outside state hands. But their grip on power — in a region rich in oil, farmland and water — remains vulnerable: President Bashar al-Assad wants all of Syria, Turkey threatens to crush them and U.S. support is wavering.

The changes reshaping swathes of Syria have alarmed neighboring states that fear separatism within their own Kurdish communities. Millions of Kurds, an ethnic minority left stateless when the Ottoman empire collapsed a century ago, live in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq.

In Qamishli, these changes were once unimaginable. A law student who was tortured for carrying a Kurdish book now owns a bookstore. A woman who once secretly huddled with friends at night to learn Kurdish is now a de facto education minister.

Kurdish activists who could not protest without risking arrest now have printing presses, festivals and television channels.

The shift is glaring in school hallways where, for eight years, a generation has grown up not only learning Kurdish but also learning to believe that Kurds deserve the rights they were denied for decades and must hold on to them.

"We never imagined this. This was a dream," said Semira Haj Ali, who co-chairs the education board in the northeast. "Of course, we will not go back to before 2011. We will not turn back."

SANDBAGS AND TRENCHES

Syrian Kurdish leaders say they do not seek independence but want to cement autonomy that has evolved to include security forces and what amounts to a government.

Yet the sandbags and trenches around some schools or the armed men guarding printing presses show their fate still hangs in the balance.

On one side, there is the Turkish army, which has swept across the border twice to roll back the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria.

On another, there is Assad, now holding most of Syria with Russia and Iran's help. Damascus has pledged to reclaim YPG territory though the two have kept channels open.

Their main ally, the United States, helped Kurdish-led forces seize vast territory from Islamic State. But it opposes their autonomy plans and has promised nothing.

President Donald Trump's plan last year to withdraw all U.S. troops from Syria threw Kurdish officials into crisis.

Washington later changed course, and intends to leave some troops, along with forces from European allies, preserving for now the security umbrella that helped Kurdish leaders deepen their autonomy.

MOTHER TONGUE

In the early days of Syria's conflict, when Haj Ali and other activists tried introducing a Kurdish class, the government shut down the schools.

"With the parents and the students, we broke down the doors," she said. Months later, state employees returned.

Today, she heads an education board running thousands of schools and universities, and teaching adults to read Kurdish. It has built a curriculum in Kurdish, Arabic and the Syriac dialect for pupils to learn in their mother tongue, renouncing the Baathist thinking that championed Arab nationalism in the classroom.



Kurdish students attend class at a school in Qamishli, Syria, March 11, 2019. Picture taken March 11, 2019. REUTERS/Issam Abdallah

It teaches children until the 10th grade, up to age 16. In secondary schools however, inside the same buildings, state teachers still handle the 11th and 12th grade.

"They succumbed to the reality," said Haj Ali, a member of the Kurdish PYD party, the YPG's political wing. Next year, her board will start teaching the 11th grade too.

The plans face opposition not just from the government but also from some Arab communities, Kurdish parties opposed to the PYD and parents who fear for their children's future, several teachers said.

The schools in northeast Syria, like the self-run administration, are not recognized officially by the state or the outside world.

In response to questions from Reuters, Syria's education ministry said it repeatedly tells all schools to keep the government curriculum for the benefit of the students and for degrees to remain valid abroad.

Some feel they have sacrificed too much to turn back now. Pre-school director Nujin Kali said her husband, a YPG fighter, had died so she could do her job.

"Honestly, I asked him what if something happens to you?" she recalled. "He said, 'I'm doing this for your children's future...for them to learn their language, for people not to lose their rights.'"

BURNING BOOKS

Despite historic enmity, Kurdish fighters and Damascus have seldom clashed during Syria's war, at times fighting common enemies including Turkey-backed rebels.

This relationship enabled the state to hold onto patches of Qamishli, including an airport that flies planes to Damascus, and of Hasaka city nearby. It has also allowed for Kurdish leaders to make money from oil sold into government territory.

Funds also come from levies on trade, agriculture and border-crossing fees.

Residents register births, marriages and deaths at state centers in Qamishli and Hasaka, while the self-run administration issues driving licenses and other documents.

Senior Kurdish leader Fawza Youssef said such ties enabled people to get on with their daily lives.

Still, attempts to negotiate a political deal with Damascus have gone nowhere, causing fears for Kurdish authorities who want to safeguard their gains.

They hope such a deal would also help shield their region from attack by Turkey, which deems the YPG a branch of the Kurdish PKK movement waging an insurgency on Turkish soil.

In northern Syria, another source of tension is that local critics accuse the PYD of calling the shots and imposing its ideas even in city councils that include Arabs and other ethnicities.

At the institute that sets the curriculum in the town of Amuda, the walls bear pictures of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. The northern region's ➔

➔ new governing system is based on his views of federalism, though the PYD says it has only political relations with the PKK.

Teachers say the curriculum does not promote any ideology, but presents Ocalan's ideas along with others in classes such as "culture and ethics" or gender studies.

The questions of how to govern and what to teach have caused friction in mainly Arab cities and towns in Raqqa and Deir al-Zor that came into the Kurdish fold more recently.

Abdallah Shekho's shop in Qamishli sells books he translated with friends into Kurdish. He said the northeast, whose economy was long stifled, still relies on Damascus in some ways because it lacks equipment and experts.

In the past, people burnt Kurdish books out of fear or buried them in their villages to keep them safe, Shekho said.

"(In) this region, God forbid, if there is an attack from the regime or another side, we will have to burn these books or bury them underground again." ●



May 5, 2019

KDP strikes new government deals with Gorran and PUK

By Rudaw.net 5/5/2019

SULAIMANI, Kurdistan Region – The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has reached a final understanding regarding the next Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in separate deals signed with the Change Movement (Gorran) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Sulaimani on Sunday.

Nechirvan Barzani, leading a delegation from the KDP, arrived in Sulaimani on Sunday morning to meet with the PUK and Gorran, hoping to end months of discussions over the formation of the next government.

"We have reached an understanding and we hope that in the next few days we will start the process of forming the next cabinet by initially reviving the Kurdistan presidency law," KDP spokesperson Mahmoud Mohammed told reporters Sunday afternoon after the meeting between his party and Gorran.

Kurdistan Region Parliament Speaker Vala Farid announced in a statement on Tuesday that a session will convene on Wednesday to discuss the presidency bill.

The KDP first reached a deal with Gorran in February with Gorran agreeing to enter the government and pushing a package of institutional reforms.

"We have emphasized that the main issue in this agreement is reform in every field of power, administration and governance in particular in the unification of the Peshmerga force and Interior [Ministry] forces as well as the independence of the judiciary system," said Gorran spokesperson Shores Hajji at the Sunday press conference in Sulaimani.

Another of Gorran's priorities is amending the presidency law, calling for the president to be elected by parliament not a public vote.

The government-formation process has dragged on for more than seven months. Parliamentary elec-



KDP deputy leader Nechirvan Barzani (L) and PUK acting leader Kosrat Rasul sign new agreement on government formation in Sulaimani, May 5, 2019. Photo: Rudaw TV

tions were held on September 30, 2018, with the KDP coming out on top, winning 45 seats in the 111-seat legislature, but not securing an outright majority. It has spent more than half a year trying to build a governing coalition with the PUK, which won 21 seats, and Gorran, which has 12 seats.

After signing its agreement with Gorran, KDP then arrived at a similar pact with the PUK in March, but disagreements over distributing cabinet positions lingered. Gorran and PUK also disagreed over the president's deputies.

PUK, which shares control of the security forces with the KDP, wanted the creation of a second deputy president who would be responsible for military affairs. Gorran, which does not have an armed force, objected, arguing that the new post would be a financial drain and, if created, should be solely an administrative position.

Speaking on Sunday, Hajji said that, amid the disputes, forming the government must be the priority, for the sake of the people and the market.

"The interest of the Kurdish peo-

ple and the revival of the bazaar is our main responsibility and we believe, given the circumstances which the wider region is facing, the sooner the government is formed is in the interest of the Kurdish people and the bazaar," he said.

KDP's Mohammed thanked Gorran "for being understanding in relation to our agreement."

Gorran formed as a breakaway group from the PUK in 2009, and the two parties have since had on-and-off relations. Gorran are depending on the KDP to bring the PUK on board.

"For a few months, we have not had any official relations with the PUK. Unofficially maybe we have received some messages, but there have been no official contacts," Shunas Sherko, an official with Gorran's diplomatic relations department, told Rudaw TV after the press conference.

"We hope that the PUK and Komal (Kurdistan Islamic Group) take part in the next cabinet, but given that the KDP is the main winner of the last election it is their responsibility to approach these parties," he said.

Roadmap for reform

Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, founding President of the Middle East Research Institute (MERI) and former KRG Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, told Rudaw the primary job of the new KRG is further unifying the Region and erasing past traces of division.

The new government has to set up a roadmap for the coming years to unify the Peshmerga and security forces, Ala'Aldeen argued.

Another roadmap that would redraw the governance of education, health and services is also necessary, he said.

"The biggest weakness of the Regional Government is its high centralization," Ala'Aldeen said.

Striking an optimistic note, the analyst noted that all parties participating in the KRG have emphasized institutional reform.

"The four years will test whether they are serious or not in establishing the foundations [of reform]," he said.

"There is plenty of space for reform, but for the people to believe it, the government needs to take practical steps."

Previous governments have delivered plenty of reform, Ala'Aldeen said, but they have done little to publicize it.

"The next government might not be able to get to everything, but it has to be clear about what it needs to give priority to."

The events of October 2017, when Iraqi forces seized the disputed territories from the Peshmerga, provide a "big lesson that control and command of Peshmerga forces and other armed forces have to be settled".

"This has to be a priority," Ala'Aldeen said.

Nevertheless, people also need services like health, education, and municipalities, he added. ■

Why did Turkey allow jailed Kurdish leader to meet lawyers after long pause?

In his first meeting with lawyers in eight years, imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan called for "democratic negotiation" between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds and for hunger strikers protesting his treatment not to endanger their health.

AL-MONITOR / Amberin Zaman
 May 6, 2019
www.al-monitor.com/

Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), called on US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to refrain from conflict with Turkey and to take what he termed Turkey's sensibilities into account. The 70-year-old guerrilla boss relayed his appeal through his lawyers after they were granted access to him for the first time in eight years.

The Turkish authorities' decision to end his isolation has spurred speculation of a possible resumption of peace talks that would include a deal on Syria. Others say it's part of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's plan to ditch his nationalist partners and win Kurdish support, which proved critical to the opposition's victory, before a rerun of municipal elections in Istanbul. Turkey's Supreme Electoral Commission ruled in favor of Erdogan's demands for fresh elections today.

But the immediate goal appeared to be to leverage Ocalan's uncontested leadership over the PKK to persuade thousands of prisoners who are on an extended hunger strike in protest of his isolation to end their fast.

In a statement that was shared by his lawyers at a news conference today, Ocalan called for "democratic negotiation" between Turkey and the Kurds and the use of soft power instead of "tools of physical violence." He said, "We believe that though the Syrian Democratic Forces, all parties should strive to resolve outstanding issues in Syria by shunning the culture of conflict and embracing constitutionally enshrined local democracy within the framework of a united Syria."

Ocalan also called on the hunger strikers not to take their actions to a point that threatens their health or results in death. Turkey's Human Rights Association said in an April 22 report that at least 3,000 prisoners in 92 prisons across Turkey were on hunger strike.

Seven of them took their own lives in March within the space of a single week. Another by the name of Ugur Sakar killed himself in Germany on Feb. 21, in a morbid manifestation of the cultish devotion Ocalan continues to inspire some 20 years since being sentenced to lifelong imprisonment on Imrali Island on terror and treason charges.

Ibrahim Bilmez was among the four lawyers who applied to visit Ocalan but did not make it to the island. He said, "We believe the government finally granted us access to our client after refusing to do so 810 times because of its fear of the hunger strikes. Thousands of lives are at risk." Bilmez told Al-Monitor worries over a public backlash were evident in the authorities' hasty burials of the seven inmates who had died so far. "Their remains were spirited away in the late night hours and only immediate family members were permitted to attend their interment."

Bilmez added that it was premature to conclude that the visit amounted to a reversal of the government's harsh repression of the Kurdish political movement, which has seen thousands of people, including democratically elected lawmakers and mayors, locked up on scantily evidenced terror charges. The justice minister has not responded to lawyers' and Ocalan's brother Mehmet's subsequent request to meet with the PKK leader in the wake of the May 2 visit. "It may be a one-off thing, and if so the hunger strikers may decide to continue their strike. The ball is squarely in the government's court," Giran Ozcan, the Washington representative of the Peoples' Democratic Party, the third largest bloc in the Turkish parliament, told Al-Monitor.

But sources with close knowledge of the Turkish government's Kurdish dossier asserted that the prison assignation was intimately linked to a broader effort to stitch together a deal with the PKK on northern Syria, where its US-backed affiliate and backbone of the SDF known as the People Protection Units (YPG) holds sway. One of the sources who spoke



A man holds a picture of Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan as people gather to celebrate Nowroz in Istanbul, Turkey, March 24, 2019. REUTERS/Kemal Aslan

to Al-Monitor on condition of strict anonymity because of the sensitive nature of the topic claimed that officials from Turkey's national spy agency, MIT, had recently met with SDF commander Mazlum Kobane, a close associate of Ocalan in northern Syria.

"The first meeting took place 10 days ago, then another last week, and after meeting Sahin, they met with Ocalan on the island and then again with Sahin," the source said, using Kobane's real name of Ferhat Abdi Sahin. He is also known as Sahin Cilo from his years in the PKK. The source went on, "The meetings started a month ago through the United States' mediation. Of course they will all deny it for now. And the prison visit is not related to the elections. The Kurds will continue to support the opposition in any Istanbul re-run."

SDF officials could not be reached for comment. But if such talks did occur, they would not be a first. Kobane told Al-Monitor in a March interview that he had met with MIT officials in Syria when peace talks between Ocalan and the Turkish government were still ongoing.

Kobane confirmed last week at a public forum that "indirect talks" were taking place between Turkey and the SDF "through intermediaries." The United States' envoy for Syria, Jim Jeffrey, has been seeking to strike a deal between Ankara and Kobane for a proposed safe zone, shuttling between Turkey and northeastern Syria since last year.

Jeffrey was in Turkey the day that Ocalan met with his lawyers. But Kobane has said a deal could only be reached if Turkey were to pull its forces out of the mainly Kurdish enclave of Afrin, where the PKK-linked Afrin Liberation Forces have sharply escalated their attacks against the Turkish military and its Arab rebel allies in recent weeks.

But with Turkey sticking to its demands that its forces monitor the safe zone extending up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) deep into the Kurdish-controlled zone and the YPG rejecting any arrangement involving a Turkish presence, little progress has reportedly been made.

A second source with intimate knowledge of the talks contended, however, that a compromise formula that Kobane has allegedly not ruled out is purging YPG-linked military and local council members in the mainly Arab town of Tell Abyad with Turkish vetting much, in the same way they were in Manbij. But the real test of any progress, Ozcan said, will be whether Ocalan is allowed to continue to communicate with his lawyers and the outside world. ♦

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Les scénarios d'une guerre avec Téhéran

Washington ne veut pas d'un conflit mais se tient prêt, alors que Riyad a préparé un plan d'invasion de l'Iran.

GEORGES MALBRUNOT [@Malbrunot](#)

MOYEN-ORIENT «Ni guerre, ni paix». Depuis plus de trente ans, les États-Unis et l'Iran s'en tiennent à cette posture prudente. Mais avec Donald Trump, la situation a changé. Après s'être retiré de l'accord nucléaire de 2015 et avoir inscrit les gardiens de la révolution sur la liste des organisations terroristes, il va déployer au Moyen-Orient le porte-avions *USS Abraham Lincoln*, accompagné d'une task force aérienne.

Alors qu'en réaction, Téhéran devrait annoncer ce mercredi son retrait «partiel» de l'accord nucléaire, le renforcement de la présence militaire américaine est justifié par «une menace crédible» contre des cibles américaines en Irak et en Syrie, voire, selon la presse israélienne, après des informations transmises via le Mossad, sur un «plan» iranien de s'en prendre aux intérêts américains dans le Golfe.

Quelle que soit la réalité de cette «menace», le risque d'un accrochage s'est accru. «Les différents éléments de ces derniers mois vont dans une seule direction : la confrontation, décrypte un analyste français, familier du Golfe. J'exclus une guerre avec l'Iran, mais pas un dérapage dans les eaux du Golfe.»

L'Iran répète «ne pas vouloir la guerre» mais ajoute que «si on nous attaque, nous riposterons». En représailles à l'interdiction américaine à l'Iran de vendre son pétrole, Téhéran menace également de bloquer le détroit d'Ormuz, l'un des passages maritimes les plus stratégiques à l'échelle mondiale. Bref, chaque camp se tient prêt.

Dans les eaux du Golfe, la République islamique a mis au point une stratégie navale basée sur la guerre asymétrique, reposant sur la pose de mines dans le détroit d'Ormuz, le harcèlement par des essaims de vedettes rapides de bâtiments américains et des tirs de missiles antinavires terre-mer, prépositionnés sur ses côtes. «En cas de conflit, nous serons partout et nulle part pour pouvoir atteindre nos ennemis», avertit le contre-amiral Ali Fadavi, ancien chef de la marine des gardiens de la révolution. Le but est clair : «saturer l'espace» pour compliquer la tâche des systèmes de défense américains.

«Il n'y a qu'un chenal en eaux profondes dans le Golfe pour faire passer les na-



Les vedettes iraniennes (ici, lors d'un exercice), plus rapides que les navires américains, sont un élément de guérilla stratégique dans l'hypothèse d'attaques de tankers dans le détroit d'Ormuz. ATTA KENARE/AFP

vires de guerre américains, constate l'analyste. Les Iraniens vont arriver avec leurs drones pour essayer de voir ce qui se passe. Si les gardiens de la révolution s'approchent trop près du navire américain, ça peut partir en sucette», redoute l'expert.

Au cœur de cette guérilla maritime pour mener des embuscades et attaquer rapidement des pétroliers, les vedettes iraniennes peuvent aller jusqu'à 65 nœuds, une vitesse supérieure à celle des navires américains. L'Iran en a produit de nombreuses, permettant la constitution de meutes, armées de lance-roquettes et de missiles de dernière génération. «Des dizaines de vedettes suicides sont capables de mettre à mal les navires de guerre les plus puissamment armés, mais non préparés à cette forme de guérilla», souligne un rapport du centre d'études supérieures de la Marine française.

Les centaines de vedettes rapides sont également capables de mouiller entre deux et six mines. Destinées à entraver la circulation dans le détroit d'Ormuz, les mines sont le deuxième élément de la guérilla maritime iranienne. Leur pose doit être rapide et discrète dans les passages les plus étroits du détroit. Outre des reconstitutions de stocks provenant de Russie, de Chine et de Corée du Nord, l'Iran a créé sa propre industrie - mines

à contact M-08 notamment - via des répliques de mines chinoises. Téhéran en posséderait plusieurs milliers, mais d'après des experts américains, 300 seulement suffiraient pour bloquer Ormuz.

Pour le mouillage de ces mines, «les Iraniens ont aussi des petits sous-marins de poche avec deux personnes à l'intérieur, comme des cimetières flottants au fond de l'eau attendant qu'il y ait un porte-avions en face pour remonter à la surface et tirer deux torpilles», explique notre analyste. Téhéran disposerait au total d'une quinzaine de sous-marins (de type Kilo et Ghadir), capables de mettre à l'eau entre 8 et 24 mines par sortie, et un plus large de classe Nahang.

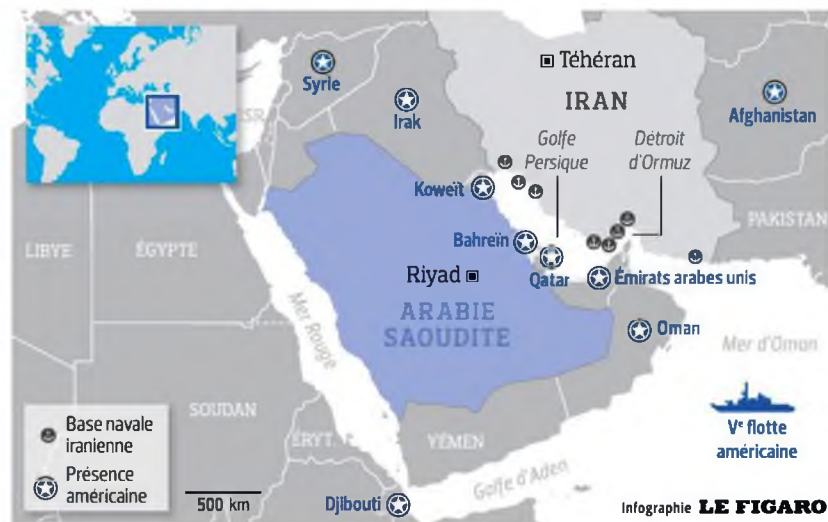
Un minage du détroit d'Ormuz entraînerait un arrêt probable du trafic, les compagnies d'assurances maritimes refusant alors de couvrir le risque. Sachant que la neutralisation d'une mine prend 200 fois plus de temps que son mouillage, et même si les supertankers sont capables de survivre à l'explosion d'une mine, le déminage du détroit serait long et périlleux. Car les Marines étrangères s'exposeraient aux missiles tirés depuis les côtes iraniennes. Les stratèges iraniens ont compris que les lanceurs de missiles installés sur leurs bateaux de guerre ne pèseraient pas lourd face à leurs ennemis. Ils ont donc opté pour un déploiement sur leurs côtes, jalonnées

de criques où les gardiens de la révolution disposent de nombreuses aires de transit, de batteries de missiles antinavires, dont le C-802, modèle subsonique évoluant au ras des vagues et d'une portée de 120 kilomètres.

Bref, « si les autorités iraniennes sont conscientes qu'elles ne peuvent pas affronter militairement une puissance comme les États-Unis, selon le rapport de la Marine française, leur but est de convaincre l'adversaire que le prix à payer pour remporter la victoire est disproportionné au regard des dommages qui lui seront infligés ».

C'est bien pourquoi ces dernières années, tout en se regardant en chiens de faïence, Marines américaine et iranienne se respectaient. « Les harcèlements par l'Iran avaient diminué », selon l'analyste, « les lignes rouges étaient connues de part et d'autre, mais aujourd'hui, on n'est pas à l'abri d'un dérapage ». Washington est poussé par ses alliés saoudien et émirien. « Riyad et Abu Dhabi parient sur un dérapage, ajoute-t-il, ils savent qu'ils doivent aller vite face à l'Iran, ils n'ont qu'un an environ, d'ici à l'élection présidentielle américaine ».

Soutenu à bout de bras par Donald Trump, le jeune prince héritier saoudien Mohammed Ben Salman a demandé à ses généraux de lui préparer un plan pour envahir l'Iran, révèle au Figaro une source militaire française. « Oui, c'est vrai », confirme l'analyste qui rappelle le jeu vidéo, non-officiel bien sûr mais diffusé sur un média saoudien, d'une telle invasion.



“ En cas de conflit, nous serons partout et nulle part pour pouvoir atteindre nos ennemis ”

LE CONTRE-AMIRAL ALI FADAVI

« Des généraux saoudiens nous ont parlé de ce plan, confie le militaire français. MBS leur a réclamé une doctrine amphibie. L'Arabie nous a demandé des embarcations pour débarquer sur les côtes iraniennes. Je leur ai répondu : "mais vous êtes sérieux ? Vous avez en face des centaines de milliers de gars qui savent faire la guerre". »

Sur le jeu vidéo, disponible sur

YouTube, des soldats débarquent sur les côtes iraniennes et des chars saoudiens défilent sur la célèbre place Azadi de Téhéran sous les clameurs d'Iraniens, heureux d'agiter des fanions saoudiens. On voit même le général Qassem Soleimani, l'ennemi juré d'Israël et de ses alliés sunnites du Golfe, se rendre dans son bunker ! Scénario plus qu'improbable. Certes, « mais avec Trump, les faucons John Bolton, MBS, Mohammed Ben Zayed des Émirats et l'Israélien Benyamin Nétanyahou, il y a un dangereux alignement des planètes. Je n'ai jamais vu autant de dirigeants du Moyen-Orient aussi anti-iraniens ». Malgré les dangers d'un tel dérapage, le pire n'est pas à exclure. ■



Syrie: les Kurdes refusent les accords de "réconciliation" du régime

Beyrouth, 3 mai 2019 (AFP)

LES FORCES DÉMOCRATIQUES SYRIENNES (FDS), dominées par des combattants kurdes, se sont dit prêts vendredi à dialoguer avec le régime syrien, mais ont rejeté les accords dits de "réconciliation" généralement imposés par ce dernier.

A la faveur de la guerre qui a éclaté en 2011, les Kurdes de Syrie, une minorité ethnique représentant 15% de la population, ont établi une administration autonome sur de vastes territoires dans le nord et le nord-est du pays. Cette autonomie n'est pas reconnue par le régime syrien.

"Nous n'accepterons en aucun cas un retour à l'avant-2011", a martelé vendredi Mazloum Kobani, le chef des FDS, lors d'une conférence organisée à Ain Issa, une ville du nord de la Syrie sous contrôle kurde.

"Il n'est pas possible de régler les problèmes existants et les grands défis de la région (...) par le biais des (accords de) réconciliations", a-t-il ajouté.

Ces derniers mois, le président syrien Bachar al-Assad a fait part de sa volonté de reconquérir les zones kurdes, par "la force" ou à travers des accords dits de "réconciliation".

Dans le passé, son régime a imposé ces accords dans des zones contrôlées par les rebelles à l'issue de sièges et de campagnes de bombardements intensifs.

Ils prévoyaient notamment une évacuation des combattants et des civils réfractaires à l'autorité du régime et le redéploiement des institutions de l'État dans les zones reconquises.

Des analystes et ONG ont comparé ces accords à des capitulations, tandis que des opposants au régime d'Assad les ont qualifiés de "déplacements forcés".

Certaines personnes restées sur place auraient en outre été arrêtées après

avoir accepté les termes de ces accords, selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'Homme (OSDH) et des militants.

Soutenu par la Russie et l'Iran, le régime syrien a enchaîné les victoires contre rebelles et jihadistes ces dernières années et contrôle aujourd'hui près des deux tiers du pays.

Les zones contrôlées par les Kurdes s'étendent sur environ un tiers de la Syrie. Les FDS ont été le fer de lance de la lutte contre le groupe jihadiste Etat islamique (EI) dans le nord et l'est de la Syrie avec l'aide des États-Unis.

Le 23 mars, elles ont proclamé l'éradication de ce qui fut le "califat" autoproclamé par l'EI en s'emparant du dernier réduit des jihadistes à Baghouz, dans l'est de la Syrie.

Le chef des FDS a affirmé être prêt pour "un dialogue avec le régime syrien" afin de parvenir à une "solution globale" en Syrie.

"Aucun règlement réel" ne peut émerger "sans une reconnaissance totale et constitutionnelle des droits du peuple kurde" et de la légitimité de "l'administration autonome", a-t-il toutefois défendu.

Les Kurdes, qui ont maintenu tout au long du conflit une position neutre envers le régime et les rebelles, ont entamé l'été dernier des négociations avec Damas concernant l'avenir de leur autonomie mais aucun accord n'a été trouvé à ce jour.

Déclenchée en 2011, la guerre en Syrie n'a eu de cesse de se complexifier au fil des ans, impliquant plusieurs acteurs régionaux et internationaux. Le conflit a fait en huit ans plus de 370.000 morts et déplacé plusieurs millions de personnes. ●

L'alliance russo-syrienne à la reconquête d'Idlib

Les attaques contre l'ultime bastion rebelle ont fait des dizaines de morts

BEYROUTH, ISTANBUL -
correspondants

La machine de guerre syro-russe s'est remise en branle dans la région d'Idlib. Cette poche du nord-ouest de la Syrie, qui est l'ultime bastion de l'insurrection contre le régime de Bachar Al-Assad, est soumise depuis le 30 avril à de violents bombardements.

Ces attaques, qui ont déjà fait des dizaines de morts, et déplacé 150 000 personnes, sont les plus meurtrières depuis l'accord de démilitarisation russo-turc de septembre 2018. Ce compromis avait suspendu l'opération de reconquête à laquelle la zone d'Idlib, peuplée de 3 millions de personnes et contrôlée par le groupe djihadiste Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (HTC), semblait promise.

Les frappes de l'armée régulière et de son allié russe, qui raniment la peur d'une offensive généralisée, se concentrent pour l'instant sur la partie sud du bastion rebelle. En plus de pilonner les positions de ses adversaires, le camp progouvernemental, fidèle à sa méthode, cible les infrastructures civiles. Selon les Nations unies (ONU), en l'espace de dix jours, douze installations médicales et neuf écoles ont été touchées par des raids aériens et des tirs d'artillerie. Cette tactique a contribué à la victoire des forces loyalistes à Alep-Est, reprise aux rebelles en décembre 2016, et dans la Ghouta, la banlieue de Damas, regagnée en avril 2018.

Milices kurdes du nord

Les assaillants ont aussi commencé à avancer au sol. L'offensive est menée par les unités d'élite du régime, comme la IV^e division blindée et les forces du Tigre, avec le concours de milices pro-Assad locales, et le soutien aérien de la Russie : un cocktail de forces déjà à l'œuvre, là encore, à Alep-Est et dans la Ghouta. Des observateurs jugent que la cam-



pagne d'Idlib sera plus ardue que ces batailles-là. La région compte de 30 000 à 50 000 combattants anti-Assad, dont une grande partie pourrait être prête à se battre jusqu'au bout, par fanatisme religieux, ou parce qu'elle se trouve dos au mur. Idlib étant la dernière possession de la rébellion, où une partie des vaincus d'Alep, de la Ghouta et de Deraa ont été transférés, les insurgés n'auront pas d'autre choix que de se battre ou de se rendre. « *Reprendre Idlib sera tout sauf un pique-nique* », assure Nawar Oliver, un analyste proche de l'opposition.

L'une des inconnues de cette nouvelle confrontation réside dans l'attitude de la Turquie. Ankara n'a toujours pas réagi à l'escalade en cours, alors même que l'un des douze postes d'observation mis en place par son armée dans la région d'Idlib a été touché, samedi, par un obus loyaliste. Ce silence inquiète les opposants syriens, qui redoutent une réédition du scénario d'Alep-Est, où leur lâchage par Ankara – en échange du consentement de Moscou à une attaque turque contre les milices kurdes du nord de la Syrie – avait facilité la tâche du régime. « *C'est ce qui va se passer, croit savoir Taleb Ibrahim, un analyste prorégime. La Turquie va faciliter le retour du gouvernement à Idlib, en échange de l'aide [syrienne] pour bloquer les Kurdes dans le nord-est de la Syrie.* »

Mais Ankara doit aussi composer avec le risque qu'une attaque d'envergure ne pousse des centai-

nes de milliers de Syriens à chercher refuge sur son territoire, où vivent déjà 3,5 millions de rescapés de la guerre civile.

« *Si les combats se propagent à la totalité de la région d'Idlib, beaucoup de Syriens voudront se mettre à l'abri de l'autre côté de la frontière, moi le premier* », confie sur WhatsApp Abu Omar, un résident du nord de la province. « *La Turquie ne veut pas de ce scénario, souligne un diplomate occidental en poste à Damas. Elle l'a fait comprendre à la Russie, qui s'efforce de modérer les ardeurs du régime. Le Kremlin est obligé de tenir compte des réserves turques s'il ne veut pas que le processus d'Astana s'effondre* », ajoute cette source en référence au mécanisme de désescalade, lancé en 2017, sous l'égide de Moscou et d'Ankara.

Matériel russe

L'approche de la livraison à Ankara du système de défense antiaérien russe S-400, prévue en juillet, pourrait aussi inciter le président Vladimir Poutine à ménager son homologue turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Moscou n'a guère d'intérêt à perturber l'arrivée de ce matériel qui promet d'achever de mettre la relation américano-turque par terre. Le 27 avril, Vladimir Poutine avait déclaré qu'il n'excluait pas un assaut massif sur Idlib mais que, pour le moment, Moscou et Damas considéraient « *qu'un tel développement [était] inenvisageable, avant tout pour des raisons humanitaires* ».

Si des sites d'information prorégime, comme *Al-Masdar*, assurent que la bataille finale est lancée, le gouvernement syrien parle

L'une des inconnues de la confrontation réside dans l'attitude de la Turquie

de simples « *représailles* » à des violations de l'accord de démilitarisation de septembre 2018. Cet arrangement devait garantir l'arrêt des hostilités, en séparant les belligérants de part et d'autre d'une zone démilitarisée de quinze à vingt kilomètres de large. Le répit ainsi obtenu devait aider la Turquie à neutraliser Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham, considéré par la communauté internationale comme un groupe terroriste, en l'obligeant à se dissoudre dans la rébellion.

Mais la poursuite des bombardements du régime et l'inflexibilité de HTC, qui a écrasé en janvier un groupe rebelle rival, ont torpillé ce plan. « *Le régime considère que la Turquie a échoué à mettre au pas les groupes rebelles. Les bombardements constituent une punition, on n'est pas en présence d'une opération de reconquête totale* », estime le diplomate. « *[Damas] ne dispose pas de la main-d'œuvre suffisante pour une offensive généralisée, prétend Nawar Oliver. Il lui faudrait mobiliser de nombreuses milices pro-iraniennes, qui n'ont pas les faveurs de la Russie.* »

Damas, aux dires de certains analystes, chercherait avant tout à reprendre le contrôle des deux autoroutes qui traversent cette région : Damas-Alep et Lattaquié-Alep. Cet objectif pourrait être atteint sans toucher au cœur du territoire de HTC, situé plus au nord, où les personnes déplacées par les combats pourraient se réfugier, épargnant ainsi la Turquie.

Mais Bachar Al-Assad, qui a toujours affirmé vouloir récupérer l'intégralité du territoire syrien, pourrait-il se satisfaire d'une demi-offensive ? « *Non, l'objectif, c'est de reprendre tout Idlib, clame Taleb Ibrahim. Avec la coopération discrète de la Turquie, les combats seront moins compliqués qu'on ne le dit. L'opération pourrait être terminée à la fin juillet. Ce n'est plus qu'une question de temps.* » ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE
ET MARIE JÉGO



En Syrie, une nouvelle escalade militaire à Idlib



— Depuis le 1^{er} mai, le dernier grand bastion contrôlé par les djihadistes dans le nord-ouest du pays est la cible d'une violente offensive de l'armée syrienne, épaulée par la Russie.

— Alors que les frappes ne cessent de s'intensifier, plus de 152 000 civils ont quitté leurs foyers pour fuir les bombardements.

La perspective d'un bain de sang, tant redoutée à la rentrée 2018, est-elle en train de se redessiner ? Depuis le 1^{er} mai, les forces militaires syriennes, appuyées sur le terrain par Moscou, ont mené plusieurs raids aériens et tirs d'artillerie dans la province d'Idlib, ultime bastion djihadiste dans le Nord-Ouest syrien. Une nouvelle escalade militaire qui fragilise l'accord de cessez-le-feu entériné neuf mois plus tôt dans la région, et qui pousse des dizaines de milliers d'habitants à quitter leur foyer.

D'après les derniers bilans, au moins 53 combattants auraient été tués, mardi 7 mai, dans les sanglants affrontements qui opposent les troupes loyalistes aux djihadistes officiant sous la bannière de Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham – l'ancienne branche syrienne d'Al-Qaïda. Selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme, près de 90 civils auraient perdu la vie ces neuf derniers jours.

Impuissante devant les mouvements massifs de population, la communauté internationale retient son souffle. « Rien que pour la semaine dernière, plus de 152 000 femmes, enfants et hommes ont été déplacés, déploie-t-il, toujours le 7 mai, David Swanson, un porte-parole du bureau de la coordination des affaires humanitaires des Nations unies (Ocha). Nous nous alar-



Sur l'autoroute qui relie Damas à Alep, des Syriens fuient les attaques aériennes dans la région d'Idlib, le 9 mai.

Anas Al-Dyab/AFP

« Le régime semble vouloir mettre la région d'Alep hors de portée des attaques de Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham. »

mons (...) des attaques aériennes sur des centres de population et des infrastructures civiles, qui ont fait des centaines de morts et de blessés parmi les civils. »

Ces derniers affrontements comptent parmi les plus meurtriers depuis que Moscou et Ankara, parrain de certains groupes rebelles, ont signé en septembre 2018 l'accord dit de Sotchi, entérinant la mise en œuvre d'une « zone démilitarisée » à l'ourlet de la province. En empêchant le lancement d'une offensive d'envergure du régime sur Idlib, cette initiative, censée garantir un arrêt des hostilités, devait permettre de séparer géographiquement les territoires insurgés des zones gouvernementales. Mais après des mois de

tensions relativement contenues, Damas a repris, depuis février, le pilonnage de la région.

« Je ne pense pas qu'il s'agisse de la fameuse bataille, prédite depuis tant de temps, qui entérinerait la reprise en un seul bloc de la province d'Idlib. Le régime semble plutôt vouloir mettre la région d'Alep – et plus spécifiquement la ville d'Alep – hors de portée des attaques de Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham, qui se sont accrues ces dernières semaines », décrypte le géopolitologue Frédéric Pichon, auteur de *Syrie, une guerre pour rien* (1).

« Il s'agirait de redonner un peu d'oxygène sécuritaire à Alep, alors que ses axes autoroutiers ne sont pas sécurisés et que les chefs de guerre y organisent la pénurie, dans un climat économique catas-

trophique », poursuit-il. Selon lui, la reprise d'Idlib « n'est pas prioritaire aujourd'hui dans l'agenda de Damas », qui concentrerait davantage son attention sur les enjeux politiques et énergétiques dans les régions kurdes du nord-est du pays. « Ces attaques ont aussi pu marquer un tour de chauffe pour tester la réaction des Occidentaux », conclut-il.

Ruines d'hôpitaux, files de voitures fuyant les débris, départ à la hâte de certains Syriens à même leurs tracteurs... Sur les réseaux sociaux, les images des bombardements circulent en boucle. Ayant afflué pour la plupart d'autres bastions rebelles reconquis par le régime, l'écrasante majorité des trois millions d'habitants de la région vit ici grâce à l'aide humanitaire.

« L'aide ne peut plus arriver jusqu'à Idlib, s'alarme toutefois un ancien traducteur – contacté par *La Croix* – de la Free Idlib Police, une organisation civile qui assurait un service sécuritaire dans l'enclave avant de suspendre ses patrouilles, en janvier. La situation pour les civils n'est pas sûre du tout, mais nous nous débrouillons comme nous pouvons pour nous protéger. » « Beaucoup de gens sont partis se réfugier dans les villages proches de la frontière turque, poursuit-il. Mais cette attaque ne devrait pas s'éterniser, parce qu'elle n'est d'aucune utilité... »

Malo Tresca

Réunion en urgence du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU

Une réunion d'urgence du Conseil de sécurité de l'ONU sur la situation – notamment humanitaire – de la province syrienne d'Idlib se tiendra à huis clos, ce vendredi 10 mai. Selon plusieurs diplomates, la Belgique, l'Allemagne et le Koweït en seraient à l'origine. Alors que le secrétaire général de l'organisation, Antonio Guterres, avait exhorté, lundi 6 mai, les belligérants à protéger les civils en réclamant une « désescalade urgente », la cheffe de la diplomatie européenne, Federica Mogherini, a regretté deux jours plus tard « une violation inacceptable du droit international » avec ces frappes ciblant des écoles ou des hôpitaux.

(1) Éditions du Cerf, 2017, 192 p., 16 €.



May 7, 2019

Kurdish party reiterates support for Turkey opposition in re-do Istanbul elections

Rawa Barwari / May 07-2019 kurdistan24.net

ERBIL / Turkey's Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Co-chair Sezai Temelli on Tuesday vowed to preserve its earlier stance: to support the Turkish opposition in the country's largest city and economic powerhouse Istanbul where authorities ordered a re-do of the March local elections which saw President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's candidate lose.

"We laid out a strategy for March 31. We did this to open up the path for the peace Turkey is longing for. Tomorrow, we will do what we did yesterday," Temelli said in a speech to a weekly parliamentary convention of his party in Ankara.

Turkey's Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) on Monday controversially ruled in favor of an objection by Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) on the grounds of irregularities in a tight race which the People's Republic Party (CHP)-led opposition's Ekrem Imamoglu won by a margin of 13,000 votes where 10,560,000 were eligible to vote.

YSK ordered that Istanbul elections be held again on June 23 and revoked Imamoglu's mayoral certificate prompting Erdogan's Interior Ministry to appoint the unelected governor run municipal affairs.

The strategy Temelli referred to was summarized by him in the run-up to the March 31 nationwide local elections as "winning in Kurdistan and making [AKP] lose in the West [Turkey]."

As such, the HDP did not field candidates in cities west of Turkey with sizable Kurdish populations, namely Istanbul where the party has over one million votes, the capital Ankara, Izmir, Adana, Mersin, and Antalya, helping the CHP swing victory in all of them as part of an uneasy de facto alliance—given the latter's history with the Kurds.

In a bid to consolidate religious and nationalist voters during the elections campaign, Erdogan repeatedly urged Turkish voters to take notice of Temelli's use of the name "Kurdistan," said there was no such place in Turkey, and that anyone who wished to live in Kurdistan should leave for "Northern Iraq."

Rumors in media and political circles abounded immediately after the YSK announced its decision that the HDP might have struck a secret deal to withdraw its de facto backing of the CHP because only days before, the Turkish government allowed the jailed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Ocalan, to meet his lawyers for the first time since 2011.



Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition HDP Co-chair Sezai Temelli (left); CHP's Istanbul candidate who won the March 31 elections and Mayor of Istanbul until May 6 Ekrem Imamoglu. (Photo: Kurdistan 24/Reuters)

Despite his imprisonment for over two decades, the PKK continues to revere Ocalan as an undisputed leader while a significant portion of HDP's electoral base regards him in high regard as Ankara and its western allies label him and the armed group he founded in 1974 as a "terror group."

Messages relayed by Ocalan, although unrelated to the elections, seemed to have a conciliatory tone toward Ankara, urging the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), that espouses self-rule in northern Syria after defeating the Islamic State, "to take Turkey's sensitivities into account."

Erdogan claims the SDF is a branch of the PKK and has threatened to invade Syrian Kurdistan.

HDP's Co-chair noted that the Turkish opposition – which he supported – remained silent when Erdogan appointed unelected officials to run over 100 Kurdish towns and cities by dismissing and imprisoning elected mayors or when the YSK last month ordered AKP runners-up to become mayors instead of winning HDP candidates in at least seven population centers.

"You should raise your voice against the mindset and continuing state of emergency," Temelli said. "Let's hit back on Fascism together." ♦



May 7, 2019

Turkish lira hits lowest point this year as new election jolts investors

Natasha Turak / May 7 2019
<https://www.cnbc.com>

- The lira plummeted to as low as 6.1944 to the dollar during Tuesday morning trade.
- The ruling AK Party, which narrowly lost in Istanbul on March 31, won its appeal for a new election on Monday.
- Former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim will again run as the AK Party's candidate for mayor on June 23 against opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu.

The Turkish lira hit a seven-month low on Tuesday after the country announced a fresh election for the city of Istanbul on the demands of Turkey's ruling AK Party, which narrowly lost

the commercial hub in municipal elections last March.

The lira plummeted to as low as 6.1944 to the dollar during Tuesday morning trade as spooked investors fled what many have described as a market too vulnerable to political intervention and suffering from weak foreign currency reserves, a wide current account deficit and rising tensions with the U.S. A new election is scheduled for June 23.

"Foreign investors will be once again concerned about heightened political instability, triggering capital flights to perceived safe havens. This situation will also renew concerns regarding the independence and credibility of Turkey's institutions," Agathe Demarais, global forecasting director at the Economist Intelligence Unit, told CNBC on Tuesday.

Turkey's municipal elections saw opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu beat the mayoral candidate from President Recep Erdogan's ruling AK Party – which had held Istanbul for the past 25 years – by 14,000 votes, according to the nation's High Election Board.

The AK Party alleged irregularities in the vote count for the city of more than 10 million voters, ultimately winning its appeal for a new election. Former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim will again run as the AK Party's candidate for mayor.

Ousted mayor Imamoglu of the Republican People's Party (CHP), who took up the seat on April 17, will also re-run for the position. CHP leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu said he believed Imamoglu would win again, accusing the election board on Tuesday of "destroying laws, the judiciary and justice." □

REUTERS

MARKET WAS 'REALLY NOT EXPECTING THIS'

Rumors of renewed lira depreciation ahead of the election board's announcement has also prompted many in the country to buy foreign currencies, putting further pressure on the lira, Demarais said. The embattled currency has been hurt by government intervention into central bank policy, analysts say, which has largely held back on tightening interest rates despite the official inflation rate at more than 19%.

Erdogan has blamed the fallout on "economic sabotage" by outside actors.

"The market really was not expecting this — I think the view was surely Erdogan would not want to take such a huge risk at a time when Turkish markets and the economy are so fragile," Timothy Ash, senior emerging markets strategist at Bluebay Asset Management said in a research note Tuesday.

"Well, he proved that wrong."

The currency, which has been ranked the worst-performing in emerging markets for several consecutive weeks, went from trading at 5.9642 to the greenback at the close of last week to 6.1414 at 12:30 p.m. London time. The lira lost

as much as 40% of its value against the dollar last year as Turkey fell into recession.

The elections being re-run delays plans to reform the economy by at least two months, said Edward Parker, a managing director at Fitch Ratings who focuses on Turkey.

"We have another nearly two months of extra uncertainty," he was quoted as telling Reuters. He added that Fitch's rating of BB for Turkey, which was downgraded last July amid the country's economic turmoil, could fall further if existing weaknesses and volatility intensify. ♦

REUTERS

Explainer: Why the war in Syria's Idlib escalated again

May 9, 2019 / BEIRUT (Reuters) -

A Russian-backed Syrian government offensive in the rebel-held northwest has killed dozens of people and forced more than 150,000 to flee, the biggest escalation in the war between President Bashar al-Assad and his enemies since last summer.

Government barrel-bombing and Russian air strikes have been accompanied by limited ground assaults, straining a Russian-Turkish deal that spared the region from an offensive in September and generating new concerns for its 3 million people.

WHO CONTROLS IDLIB?

The northwest - Idlib province and a belt of territory around it - is mostly held by the jihadist Tahrir al-Sham, the latest incarnation of the former Nusra Front, which was part of al Qaeda until 2016.

The group tightened its grip earlier this year in a campaign against other rebels. Some of these still have a presence as part of the "National Front for Liberation", backed by Turkey.

Foreign jihadists have a significant presence, many of them members of the Huras al-Din group.

The Turkish military has established about a dozen military positions in the area under its agreements with Russia.

WHY HAS THE CONFLICT ESCALATED AGAIN?

The Russian-Turkish deal created a demilitarized zone from which jihadists were required to withdraw, effectively putting the onus on Turkey to tackle the problem while leaving the northwest within a sphere of Turkish influence.

But Russia's patience has been wearing thin over what it views as Turkey's failure to curb Tahrir al-Sham. Damascus, determined to recover "every inch" of Syria, has also publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo.

The government accuses the Nusra Front of igniting the violence through attacks on its areas. The rebels accuse the government and "Russian occupiers" of trying to invade.

WHERE IS THE ATTACK FOCUSED, WHAT ARE ITS AIMS?

Most of the bombardment has been in the southern part of the rebel territory including areas in the demilitarized zone.

The full scope of the attack is not yet clear, though Russian President Vladimir Putin recently said a full-scale assault in Idlib was unpractical for now.

Rebel sources believe the government's aim is to seize two highways to Aleppo that run to the south of Idlib city through rebel-held areas. Russia and Turkey had previously agreed these roads should be opened.



A general view of the refugee camp near Atimah village, Idlib province, Syria, September 11, 2018. REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi/File Photo/File Photo

Russia's motives in the northwest include securing its Latakia air base from rebel attacks.

WHAT IS THE CIVILIAN IMPACT?

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) says more than 152,000 people fled between April 29 and May 5, doubling the number of displaced in the northwest since February.

Air strikes have struck 12 health facilities, killed more than 80 civilians and wounded more than 300, OCHA said. Shelling, air strikes and fighting in more than 50 villages have destroyed at least 10 schools and teaching is suspended.

The U.N. regional humanitarian coordinator has said the barrel bombing is the worst for at least 15 months. Barrel bombs are containers filled with explosives dropped from helicopters.

COULD TURKEY BE DRAWN IN?

Turkey's response to the latest escalation has been muted, even when shelling from government-held territory struck a Turkish military position on Saturday.

Turkey has recently focused on rolling back Kurdish militia in other parts of northern Syria, notably the area near Tel Rifaat north of Aleppo. Turkey and Russia are in talks over the status of this area.

Turkey, Russia and Iran reaffirmed their commitment to the September agreement on the eve of the latest escalation.

In a joint statement after an April 25-26 meeting, they expressed concern about Tahrir al-Sham's efforts to increase its control and "reaffirmed the determination to continue cooperation" to eliminate jihadists including the Nusra Front.

Turkey's concerns would grow if the attack widened to the point of threatening another major influx of Syrian refugees. It already hosts 3.6 million.

HOW DO THE FORCES STACK UP?

The Syrian army can draw on the overwhelming fire power provided by the Russian air force and Iran-backed militias that have enabled it to defeat rebels across western Syria. The rebels do not have significant anti-aircraft defenses.

Tahrir al-Sham has said it will confront any ground assault by "the Russian occupiers" with "steel and fire". The rebel arsenal includes guided anti-armor missiles, ground-to-ground rockets and jihadist suicide bombers.

In a video address this week, a Tahrir al-Sham spokesman said that rebels driven from other parts of Syria - Ghouta, Deraa and Homs - stood ready to defend the territory. ●

Intel: How new presidency will affect power dynamics in Iraqi Kurdistan

Al-Monitor Staff / May 8, 2019
www.al-monitor.com

Lawmakers in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament formally reactivated the Office of the presidency today in a session presided over by the body's first female speaker, Vala Farid. The position was frozen when Massoud Barzani stepped aside after the 2017 independence referendum. The plebiscite had been fiercely opposed by Baghdad, as well as by Iran, Turkey and the United States, setting the stage for Iraqi military action and the loss of Kurdish control of Kirkuk and other contested territories. Barzani's nephew and son-in-law, Nechirvan Barzani, has since held the fort as prime minister.

Why it matters: On a practical level, the move is critical for the long-delayed formation of a government in the wake of parliamentary elections held in September. The parliament agreed today that it — not the public — will elect the next president.

Barzani had been directly elected following a prior change via legislation. The main opposition Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and especially Gorran had vehemently opposed the shift, saying it would give Barzani, the presumptive winner, too much power.

It remains unclear whether the president or the prime minister will now hold the reins. Bilal Wahab, a Wagner Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, spoke to Al-Monitor about the vacuum created by the lack of a constitution in Iraqi Kurdistan. "[It] means that after each election, the system has to be customized to properly reflect the power landscape," Wahab said.

Barzani or Barzani? It's a foregone conclusion that Nechirvan will be elected president because his uncle's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) stitched that up in a deal with the PUK and Gorran whereby each party will fill a deputy president slot in exchange. Masrour Barzani, the current intelligence chief and Massoud's son, will get the premiership, all part of a succession plan devised by the patriarch. The burning question is which of the cousins will ultimately prevail — Nechirvan or Masrour?

Oil and guns: The Parliament also decided that the president will retain the powers enjoyed by Massoud Barzani. This suggests that the president will remain commander in chief of the peshmerga, a key pillar of influence.

Energy is the main source of income and patronage in Iraqi Kurdistan. Nechirvan Barzani developed the sector from scratch, inking massive deals with global oil majors and more recently with Russia. The soon-to-be



Kurdistan Regional Government Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani speaks during a news conference after casting his vote during parliamentary elections in the semi-autonomous region in Erbil, Iraq, Sept. 30, 2018. REUTERS/Thaier Al-Sudani

president is said to be fighting to retain influence over the dossier by keeping his long-time ally and energy minister Ashti Hawrami in place. His cousin Masrour, however, is bent on bringing in fresh blood. A notable exception is Safeen Dizayee, the British-educated government spokesman who hails from the influential Dizayee clan and is widely seen as a shoo-in for foreign minister.

The PUK and Gorran are angling for plum posts, including finance. Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabany of the PUK will stay on. The new cabinet is unlikely to be announced before the end of Ramadan, the month of fasting.

What's next? As spy chief, Masrour Barzani has mostly operated in the shadows, surrounded by loyalists. Now he will need to master the art of dealmaking and consensus building, and for this he will need his cousin Nechirvan's help. Survival of the Barzani family has always trumped personal rivalries, so don't expect any Borgia-style backstabbing. More likely, squabbles with the PUK and Gorran will continue to hinder Iraqi Kurdistan's path to clean government and stability and maintaining a common front toward Baghdad. ♦

— Amberin Zaman

Arabs Protest Against Kurdish Rule In Oil-Rich Syrian Region



By Tsvetana Paraskova -
May 08, 2019, Deir Ezzor
<https://oilprice.com>

Arab residents of the oil-rich Deir Ezzor area in Syria have been protesting for weeks against the U.S.-backed Kurdish forces that control the region east of the Euphrates river, with protests becoming violent in recent days and angry protesters disrupting convoys of truckloads of oil from the nearby fields.

The protests, which started at the end of April, call for the end of the Kurdish rule in the area—which the Arabs say is an “occupation”—and the Kurdish forces and militias to stop selling the oil from the area and stop robbing the Arab population of its oil.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by the United States expelled Islamic State from the Deir Ezzor area at the end of 2017, and



have been in control of the oil-rich province since then.

The Arab residents in the area, however, want the Kurdish forces to stop selling the oil pumped from Deir Ezzor to the Syrian government, among other things. Arabs in eastern Syria also want end of

➔ discrimination in leadership positions and the end of compulsory conscription of young men from the area.

According to tribal leaders and residents who spoke to Reuters, the Arab resentment toward the Kurdish forces has grown in recent weeks.

Risks of a more violent confrontation are growing and SDF's response to the Arab demands could determine if the situation will escalate, analysts tell Reuters.

In August 2018, the second-largest oil field in Syria, the Tanak field in the Deir Ezzor region, resumed operations nearly a year after U.S.-backed predominantly Kurdish forces recaptured the field from ISIS.

The Tanak field, which hosts around 150 wells and the capacity to produce up to 40,000 bpd, was captured from the Islamist militants by the SDF in November of 2017, following fierce clashes with ISIS on the eastern bank of the Euphrates river.

Less than a month before recapturing the Tanak oil field, SDF had wrested control over the al-Omar oil field in eastern Syria from the Islamic State. Al-Omar is Syria's largest oil field, producing around 30,000 bpd before the civil war. After 2011, however, Al-Omar had fallen into the hands of Islamic State, which was at one point making US\$5.1 million in monthly oil sale revenues on the black market. ●

THE
GLOBE
AND
MAIL

MAY 9, 2019

Anti-Kurdish protests in eastern Syria could endanger U.S. plans

Bassem Mroue / BEIRUT / May 9, 2019

The Associated Press

<https://beta.theglobeandmail.com>

The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces took credit for defeating the Islamic State group in its last stronghold in eastern Syria, celebrating the victory in front of throngs of journalists at a ceremony in March following a bloody four-year war.

But the Kurdish-led force now faces protests by local Arab tribesmen in Deir el-Zour province demanding better services, jobs and a bigger role in decision-making in the predominantly Arab, oil-rich and fertile region. Though limited to about a dozen villages for now, the demonstrations are a growing challenge to the U.S. and its local partners at a time when President Donald Trump plans to reduce America's military presence in Syria.

On Thursday, the Kurdish-led fighters opened fire at protesters in the village of Shheil, killing one person – the first fatality since the protests began last month, according to Syrian state TV and the DeirEzzor24 activist collective, which monitors developments in the province.

The protest came after an overnight raid in the village by the U.S.-led coalition and the Kurdish force killed six people, according to DeirEzzor24 and the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitoring group. The Observatory said two people, one of them an IS member, were arrested.

An SDF official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media, said the protesters so far are a small percentage of Deir el-Zour residents. But the demonstration benefit the Syrian government, its Iranian backers and Turkey, and undermine "our victory against Daesh," he said, using an Arabic acronym for IS.

Several rounds of talks between the SDF and local officials have so far failed to make progress, leading to concerns the protests could transform into an all-out uprising against the predominantly Kurdish force, founded in 2015 to fight IS and armed by the U.S.

IS sleeper cells have intensified attacks in recent weeks. Syrian President Bashar Assad's troops, based along the west bank of the Euphrates River that cuts through Deir el-Zour, have

vowed to reassert control over Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria. And Turkey, which considers the force to be a terrorist organization, has also set its sights on the region.

The SDF controls nearly a third of Syria, but unlike the provinces of Raqqa and Hassakeh in the north that have large Kurdish populations, Deir el-Zour in the east is almost purely Arab, leading to ethnic tensions between the local population and the Kurdish force.

Two years after entering the province in their push against IS, the SDF appears to have failed to win the hearts and minds in the region, which suffers from a lack of services, rising crime, fuel shortages and anger over what they see as growing Kurdish influence.

Although the SDF is a mixed force consisting of Kurds, Arabs and Christian fighters, its backbone is the Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG. Some SDF officials see what's happening in eastern Syria as riots backed by Assad's government with the aim of hurting the SDF and its American backers.

Until Thursday's fatal shooting, the over two weeks of protests by the residents in more than a dozen towns and villages in Deir el-Zour have been mostly peaceful as the protesters closed major roads and burned tires to prevent SDF tanker trucks from taking crude to Kurdish-held areas in the country's north.

Areas liberated from IS suffer fuel shortages and IS sleeper cells are launching a guerrilla campaign to avenge their defeat two months ago when the SDF captured the village of Baghouz, marking the end of the extremists' self-declared caliphate.

Some of the protesters believe that Kurdish fighters sell oil to Assad's loyalists amid severe fuel shortages in government-held parts of the country, aggravated by U.S. sanctions on Syria and its main backer, Iran.

Since SDF began capturing parts of Deir el-Zour in 2017, residents have expressed anger at what they say has been forced recruitment of Arab residents into the SDF, as well as the detention of many on suspicion of links to IS.

"People are fed up with the SDF," said Omar Abu Laila, a Europe-based activist from Deir el-Zour who runs a group that monitors developments in the province. "They are robbing the wealth of the people in the region."

The protests took a turn for the worse on April 24, when according to Deir el-Zour activists, the U.S.-led coalition and SDF fighters stormed a house in the village of Daman and killed six people, including two women and a child. They said the raid targeted a man called Farhan al-Sarhan, whom the SDF says is linked to IS, a charge that activists deny.

A day later, protests spread quickly to nearby villages and towns including Tayyaneh, Haseen, Mheimda, Husan, Shannan and Shheil.

"No to Kurdish occupation," read one banner carried by protesters, according to images posted on social media.

"The pace of rehabilitation, economic development and provision of essential services has not been sufficient to meet the basic needs of the population," Bassam Barabandi, a former Syrian diplomat now based in Washington, said of the protests. "As a result, people are feeling very hopeless about their current situation and the future. They do not see the regime as an acceptable alternative, and they are looking for the U.S. to act."

Several meetings have been held over the past weeks between SDF officials and Arab dignitaries from Deir el-Zour to try to ease the tension without success, according to Barabandi and Observatory.

An Arab man from Deir el-Zour who took part in the talks, said that "the Kurds have been refusing to make any concessions." He spoke on condition of anonymity out of concern for his safety.

He said the SDF is taking away most of the oil it pumps in Deir el-Zour – about 60,000 barrels a day – and leaves hardly anything behind.

Arab officials demanded, among other things, the release of SDF-held detainees, stopping the flow of oil from the province, giving Deir el-Zour fighters within the SDF a bigger role, ending compulsory conscription into the SDF and improving electricity and fuel services.

Rami Abdurrahman, who heads the Observatory, said chaos in eastern Syria is not a good omen for the SDF.

"The regime could be the biggest winner from what is happening," he said. ■

US condemnation of Muslim Brotherhood would cost Turkey dearly

If the Donald Trump administration brands the Muslim Brotherhood a terror organization to please its Gulf allies and Egypt, it will create a major headache for Turkey.



Fehim Tastekin
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www.al-monitor.com

US President Donald Trump's threat to brand the Muslim Brotherhood a foreign terrorist organization could pound the final nail into the coffin of Turkey's desire to form a Muslim Brotherhood belt from Middle East to North Africa.

It could also herald a new problem for Ankara: what to do about thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members who have taken refuge in the country in years past.

Trump's announcement that he is considering a terrorist label for the Sunni Islamist organization came after his April 9 meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. The issue adds strain to already beleaguered US-Turkey ties and is pressuring Ankara to make a decision about its Muslim Brotherhood policy.

Turkey has aimed since 2011 to have Muslim Brotherhood regimes replace the dictators deposed in the Arab Spring uprisings. Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) signed on to several adventurist foreign policy projects that first lost in Egypt, following the coup that overthrew the country's Muslim Brotherhood-linked president, Mohammed Morsi.

Then Turkey suffered similar blows in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Tunisia. The latest addition to the list of deposed autocrats is President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan.

If the Muslim Brotherhood is declared a terror organization, Turkey would be much affected. The extent of the problems Turkey would face depends on the scope of the bill the Trump administration might draft. The critical question is, will only the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood be added to the blacklist, or all the organizations affiliated with it?

Although the organization's generic name in Egypt and Syria is the Muslim Brotherhood, the movement operates under different labels in other foreign countries: al-Nahda in Tunisia, Islamic Action Front in Jordan, Hamas in Palestine, Iraqi Islamic Party in Iraq, Social Action for Peace in Algeria and National Islamic Front in Sudan. The movement is known as Reform in Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Yemen and Somalia.

In many countries, political extensions of the Muslim Brotherhood are either partners of the rulers or represented in the parliaments. Even in Egypt under President Hosni Mubarak, despite all the efforts to root out the movement, the Brotherhood was engaged in politics through independently elected lawmakers and representatives in several other chambers and labor unions.

Thus, applying the terrorist brand to such an expansive movement with extensive influence over political and social life in many countries would not only unsettle Turkey, but have global ramifications. One should keep in mind that then-US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had warned in 2017 that such a move would totally upend US foreign relations.

Turkey's partnership with the Brotherhood began decades ago. During the Cold War, several books written by Egyptian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members were translated into Turkish in the 1960s to fight communism. In the 1970s, Turkey's spy agency had cooperated with the CIA and Mossad to use Muslim Brotherhood ideology against the Baathist regimes in the region. There was even speculation that some members of the movement had secretly received military training in Turkey against then-Syrian President Hafez al-Assad. After his notorious 1982 massacre in Hama to end a Sunni uprising, some movement members took refuge in Turkey and established a solid relationship with Turkey's political Islamists, which were AKP's predecessors.

However, unlike its predecessors, the AKP translated these contacts and relations into a soft power mechanism for foreign policy, shaking to its core



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan attends a news conference at the Huber Mansion in Istanbul, Turkey, March 31, 2019. REUTERS/Mura d Sezer

Turkey's traditional strategy of maintaining distance from such Islamist movements.

When the Muslim Brotherhood came to power in Tunisia and Egypt at the outset of the Arab Spring, the AKP began scheming to bring the movement to power in Syria and Libya as well. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, recognized by more than 100 countries as legal representatives of the Syrian opposition, has been the most important element of the Syrian National Council and Syrian National Coalition of Opposition and Revolutionaries. These efforts caused no discord with the United States or Turkey's other Western allies — not until the Islamic State gained strength in Syria. However, the Gulf bloc led by Saudi Arabia sees the Brotherhood as an existential threat to its monarchy.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE held Turkey and Qatar responsible for the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence as the leading power in Syria. Saudi Arabia and the UAE financed the coup in Egypt. Turkey, in response, welcomed thousands of fleeing Brotherhood members.

Although exact figures are not available, some 5,000 Muslim Brotherhood members are estimated to have gone to Turkey. These people engaged in counterpropaganda efforts against Egypt and Gulf states, establishing four TV channels in Turkey. When Qatar, under pressure from its neighbors, expelled seven of the movement's leaders in 2014, Turkey again opened its doors.

One should also keep in mind that US ties with the Muslim Brotherhood also date back decades. It's no longer a secret that the Muslim Brotherhood had promised to fully comply with international agreements that Cairo is a party to even before Egypt's strongman Mubarak stepped down in 2011. Yet, Trump's foreign policy indicates a major divergence from Washington's traditional stances. Supporting the Saudi-Egypt axis against Iran is an important aspect of this new strategy.

So what can Turkey do if the United States condemns the Muslim Brotherhood? Can Turkey continue to be the "hope of the entire Islamic world," as Brotherhood spokesman Youssef Neda once said? No doubt Turkey will raise loud objections, but it will become much more difficult for Ankara to use the movement as a means of soft power. The Turkish government could opt to be pragmatic on the matter, which has already inflicted many losses to the country's foreign policy.

As it is, Turkey has already lost a significant amount of its clout over the Middle Eastern and North African peoples because of its support of the Muslim Brotherhood. It has offended various groups, including the Iraqi people by providing refuge to that country's Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated former Vice President Tariq Al-Hashimi, Fatah by openly favoring Hamas in the intra-Palestinian conflict, secular segments of Tunisia by providing unconditional support to al-Nahda, those Libyans who support Gen. Khalifa Hifter by backing Islamist forces in Tripoli and the Sudanese who wanted to see Bashir's demise. ♦

Fehim Tastekin is a Turkish journalist and a columnist for Turkey Pulse who previously wrote for Radikal and Hurriyet.

Erdogan's perfect opponent

Selim Koru

ANKARA, TURKEY Ekrem Imamoglu, the 48-year-old politician who defeated President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party in Istanbul's recent mayoral election, is known for his gentle ways.

But on Monday night, Mr. Imamoglu was furious. A large crowd gathered to hear him in his home district, Beylikduzu. His shirt sleeves rolled up, he jabbed his index finger into the air as he spoke. "There are those who want to take the dignity of our Republic, this country, this city, under their feet!" he shouted. "But we, 82 million people, will not let a handful of people extinguish these values!"

That day, the Supreme Election Council, Turkey's top electoral body, had canceled the results of the election that Mr. Imamoglu had so momentously won. In the weeks since the March 31 vote, Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, which lost control of Istanbul for the first time in 25 years, had scrambled for recounts, hoping to close the narrow margin between Mr. Imamoglu and its candidate.

When that did not work, the party sought a rerun, arguing that clandestine organizations had sabotaged the election. For a month, the party's media juggernaut claimed that Turkey's enemies had plotted the fall of Istanbul. The question on everyone's mind was whether Mr. Erdogan would "give up Istanbul." He didn't.

In a country where the institutions of the state are intact, the opposition might curse under its breath and prepare for another campaign. But Turkey is not such a country. The election council's decision puts in question the integrity of the democratic process. A dangerous new chapter has begun.

The history of the Turkish republic can be seen as a struggle between two counteracting forces: the politicians versus the bureaucratic oligarchy, composed of senior civil servants, military generals and judges. The bureaucratic oligarchy drew the boundaries of acceptable politics; the politicians were to remain within them.

If politicians of the wrong sort — Islamists, Communists, Kurdish nationalists — rose beyond the "acceptable" thresholds, they faced legal repercussions like bans on their parties. If they persisted, and were seen to be endan-

gering the integrity of the system, there would be a military coup.

A pattern developed. Politicians would push the boundaries; judges and generals would push back and eventually wipe the slate with a coup. Turks hoped that this form of democracy would eventually find its equilibrium.

As an up-and-coming Islamist politician, Mr. Erdogan distinguished himself with an especially vivid description of this pattern. Life, he said, was an epic contest between the "national will," embodied by Muslim conservative politicians, and the "so-called elites," of business and the bureaucracy. As he spread this narrative among the population while delivering on public services, infrastructure and economic growth, his popularity increased.

He won 25 percent of votes in the 1994 municipal elections, and was elected mayor; he received 34 percent of the national vote in 2002, which helped his newly founded party form the govern-

Every misstep that Turkey's government suffers boosts Ekrem Imamoglu's support.

ment; he took 47 percent in the 2007 national elections, and was re-elected as prime minister; and he got 50 percent of the vote, and a third term as prime minister, in 2011.

By the mid-2010s, Mr. Erdogan had become so powerful that he broke the old pattern of contestation and negotiation between the bureaucratic oligarchy and elected politicians. The judges and the generals could no longer curtail or depose him.

Instead of transitioning the country to a system where these figures were loyal to the Constitution, Mr. Erdogan made them beholden to him and his party. "The fate of Turkey and the fate of the Justice and Development Party have become one," Mr. Erdogan declared in 2017.

Mr. Erdogan is now designing the rules of the game while being a player. He campaigns on the government budget, legislates against the opposition and presses media groups, both private and government-owned, into his service. He has turned electoral politics into a soccer game in which the winning team scores multiple goals — and then makes its opponents strap on heavy backpacks.

Yet until now, Mr. Erdogan did not interfere with elections. The ballot box was sacred. As long as elections were

untouched, there was hope among the opposition that someone might beat the odds. This is why the decision to redo the election in Istanbul is critical in the country's history. The team with backpacks actually scored, but the winners co-opted the referee's powers and ruled that the goal doesn't count.

It may seem odd that Mr. Erdogan is undermining the political system that carried him, a boy from the rough streets of Istanbul, to the presidency of the Republic.

Mr. Erdogan probably thinks that beating the opposition parties in election after election will eventually break them and allow him to expand his support base beyond 50 percent of the population. In this scenario, elections are reduced to being merely a ritual reaffirmation of faith in the state rather than a choice between viable alternatives.

Mr. Erdogan admires President Vladimir Putin of Russia, who won 77 percent of votes cast in an election last year. If he is aspiring for similar results, it would also mean Putinesque levels of repression and international pariah status.

Having broken the old pattern of Turkish politics, Mr. Erdogan may have created a new one. Politics is no longer about defending an ideology or a policy position, but about being the champion of "the people" against the powers that be.

Mr. Erdogan started his political journey as a pious Muslim from the wrong side of the tracks. Now he is the establishment, and as so he is bound to become less popular over time. Mr. Imamoglu, the young opposition leader, easily transcends the secular-religious divide of Mr. Erdogan's generation, earning shout-outs from pilgrims in Mecca as well as the punk rock star Gokhan Ozoguz.

And in Mr. Imamoglu voters have somewhere to go. Every misstep or misfortune Mr. Erdogan's government suffers — from the economy to foreign policy — increases Mr. Imamoglu's support. He is the perfect opponent, created by Mr. Erdogan himself.

Mr. Erdogan has devoted his life to the relentless expansion of the political sphere, subsuming the bureaucracy in the process. But what if the political sphere turns against him?

SELIM KORU is an analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation in Ankara.

Russian-Syrian forces pound Idlib, Turkey shifts attention to Kurdish positions

Not only did Erdogan back out on his Idlib promise but he temporarily withdrew his best fighters from the province, saving them for a major attack against Kurdish separatists in Kobane, Ras al-Ayn and Tell Rifaat, north of Aleppo.



Sami Moubayed
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theArabweekly.com

BEIRUT - Days after Syrian peace talks wrapped up in Kazakhstan, a major offensive was launched by Syrian and Russian forces, striking at the north-western Syrian province of Idlib and the nearby countryside of Hama, in pursuit of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the al-Qaeda affiliate in the Syrian battlefield.

The timing of the operation was surprising, coming after a statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin, who, speaking April 27 in China, said no full-fledge invasion of Idlib would happen because of the massive refugee crisis that it would trigger into Turkey and beyond.

"Right now, we and our Syrian friends consider that to be inadvisable," Putin said. Repeated attempts at forcefully retaking the city had been aborted by France and Germany, who feared a renewed flow of refugees into Europe.

The operation in Idlib remains confined to aggressive aerial bombardment, aimed more at breaking moral of the opposition than ejecting it from the Syrian city. That will be the task of the Turkish Army, through an agreement between Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached last September.

Erdogan promised to finish the job by mid-October but failed to meet the deadline, shifting his attention to the Kurdish enclave in north-eastern Syria, which he has been promising to raid since December.

That territory was far more dangerous — and urgent — for Erdogan than Idlib, a city he knew could not remain indefinitely under control of the armed groups, given its presence deep in Russia's sphere of influence.

Not only did Erdogan back out on his Idlib promise but he temporarily withdrew his best fighters — Ahrar al-Sham and the Zinki Brigade —



New escalation. Syrians, fleeing possible air strikes, drive along the main Damascus-Aleppo highway near the town of Saraqib in Syria's jihadist-held Idlib province, May 9. (AFP)

from the province, saving them for a major attack against Kurdish separatists in Kobane, Ras al-Ayn and Tell Rifaat, north of Aleppo.

The Turkish operation was to have happened in April immediately after the supposed withdrawal of US troops, who have been protecting and arming Syria's Kurds for the past five years.

By early this year, however, it became clear such a multilayered operation would not occur, certainly not after US President Donald Trump announced that he would be keeping 400 troops in Syria, stationed mostly amid the Kurdish communities. Instead Erdogan would have to go for something far small, more strategic and "surgical."

The Turkish president reverted to his earlier agreement with the Russians, seeking Putin's support for a limited operation in the Kurdish territories in exchange for cleansing Idlib on Russia's behalf, both from the Islamic State (ISIS) and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

In theory, once the city was "clean," Syrian government forces would be ushered back into Idlib, under the watchful eye of the Russian Air Force, with implicit approval of the Turks. A Russian-led reconciliation process would follow, like those in East Ghouta and Daraa. Until that

happens, the Russians will bomb HTS on Erdogan's behalf, which is what they have been doing since late April.

The two leaders had worked together in the past on similar agreement. In 2016, Erdogan looked the other way as the Russian Air Force pounded his Syrian proxies in Aleppo. In exchange for letting them retake the city in full, the Russians did nothing to prevent the carving of a Turkish-administered "safe zone" along the borderline, free from any Kurdish presence.

Three years ago, the Turks took control of Jarabulus, Azaz and al-Bab and, in mid-2018, marched on Afrin, west of the Euphrates, also within Russia's sphere of influence. In exchange for letting him take Afrin, Erdogan abandoned his proxies in the Damascus countryside, not lifting a finger to protect them in East Ghouta.

A similar scenario is in the making, amid Turkish silence over the attacks on the Idlib-Hama axis. Turkish troops at nearby positions have looked the other way as Russian bombs were dropped on Idlib.

Simultaneously, however, Turkish troops advanced on Tell Rifaat in the Aleppo countryside, where, Erdogan claims, thousands of

Kurdish fighters fled from Afrin last year. It has been on Erdogan's hit list since December, along with Kobane and Ras al-Ayn. The last two were problematic, because of a heavy concentration of US troops but Tell Rifaat was accessible, situated within the Russian zone.

The devil, however, lies in the details. For starters, how will the Kurds of Tell Rifaat respond to the Turkish operation? After their defeat in Afrin, they regrouped and rearmed, making Tell Rifaat far more difficult to overrun than Afrin.

Second, will the Americans stand by and watch their Kurdish allies being exterminated in Tell Rifaat, as they were defeated in Afrin?

Third, what will be the fate of Turkey's remaining forces in Idlib, known as the National Liberation Front, once through with their operation against HTS? A collective pardon is impossible, the Syrians insist, saying that only those who join the Russian-led reconciliation process will be allowed to stay in Idlib, after surrendering their arms. What about those, especially from HTS, who refuse?

In the past, armed groups who said no to the Russians were shipped off to Idlib but now, with Idlib poised to return to government control, where will the militants go? There are very few pockets left in Syria that are under control of the armed opposition and those that are will refuse to welcome a contingent from HTS and the Islamic State.

Meaning either the Russians will have to come up with another Idlib or defeat them fully in Idlib itself, something that will probably take a very long time and is easier said than done.♦

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of Under the Black Flag (IB Tauris, 2015).

They Were ‘Comrades in Arms’ Against ISIS. Now the U.S. Is Eyeing the Exit.

By Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt
May 12, 2019

www.nytimes.com

RMEILAN, Syria — Dressed in camouflage and sipping tea, the Syrian commander who emerged as America’s closest ally in the battle that defeated Islamic State looked to an unsettling future.

The commander, the Kurdish leader of the Syrian Democratic Forces, known by the nom de guerre Mazlum Kobani, praised his alliance with the United States in a rare interview recently and said he hoped American troops would stay in Syria.

But if they do not, he said, he is still fully prepared to defend his militia’s hard-fought gains during years of fighting the terrorist group.

“We were comrades in arms — we are on the same front fighting ISIS,” he said of the Americans, sitting in a furnished trailer in a compound that once belonged to the Syrian state oil company.

Now he is worried about a swift withdrawal, pointing to the American departure from Iraq in 2011, which was followed by the rise of Islamic State.

“They must not make the same mistake,” he warned.

As the commander of the American-backed militia that fought the Islamic State, Mazlum now oversees forces controlling one-third of Syria and sits at the nexus of clashing international interests in the jihadists’ former lands.

The Syrian government has threatened to take the territory back — by force, if necessary. Thousands of Islamic State fighters have gone underground to launch new attacks and plot their comeback.

And neighboring Turkey, which has fought Kurdish separatists at home for decades, is openly hostile to the Syrian Kurds along its border who have gained territory, sophisticated weapons and powerful alliances as a result of Syria’s eight-year civil war.

That puts Mazlum and the Kurdish forces that form the backbone of the S.D.F. at a crossroads. They have a historic militancy toward Turkey, but also an interest in preserving the power they have gained in Syria, said Daren Khalifa, a senior Syria



The commander of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, who goes by the nom de guerre Mazlum Kobani, at a military base in Kurdish-controlled northeast Syria. Credit Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

analyst with the International Crisis Group who has met with Mazlum in Syria.

Then there is the United States.

Mazlum owes most of his strength to the American presence in eastern Syria. But Washington’s commitment is uncertain and its plans have changed so frequently that no one — including him — knows how long the American forces will stay put.

“They have gained in Syria what they are not going to be able to get anywhere else,” Ms. Khalifa said of the S.D.F., “so they want to preserve that,” Ms. Khalifa said.

Those gains include a greatly expanded territory under their political control, where the group hopes to maintain its own administration.

So far, the United States has not used its relationship with Mazlum to push for a longer-term accommodation between Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

“The U.S. has refused to acknowledge the problem and therefore has refused to act on it,” Ms. Khalifa said.

AN ESSENTIAL AMERICAN ALLY

The partnership between Mazlum’s forces and the United States was born of necessity during a crisis.

In 2014, after seizing large parts of Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State surrounded the Kurdish town of Kobani in northern Syria, along the Turkish border. To fend off the assault, the United States armed the region’s main Syrian Kurdish militia while bombing heavily from the air.

The strategy worked, and the United States found a new partner in Syria, the Kurdish militia known as the People’s Protection Units, or Y.P.G. The militia was a Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or P.K.K., which has long fought for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey.

Unlike Syria’s Arab rebels, the Kurds were happy to fight the Islamic State instead of the Syrian government. And as a secular movement, they raised no concerns that they might harbor sympathies with Islamist extremists.

With backing from the United States and its allies, the group pushed the jihadists from other parts of Syria and built ties with other militias. In 2015, under prompting from the United States, it rebranded itself as the Syrian Democratic Forces — a mix of Kurdish, Arab and other fighters.

In the process, Mazlum became essential to the United States.

→ “We tend to go to Mazlum for everything,” said one American official who has worked with the militia leader. But the partnership suffered a blow in December when President Trump said he was withdrawing the 2,000 American troops from eastern Syria.

Since then, American plans have changed repeatedly, most recently calling for a drawdown to 1,000 troops followed by a reassessment. Mazlum said he hoped the United States would remain to help take on the Islamic State fighters who have gone underground and to oversee a restructuring of the S.D.F. into an internal security force.

But he will have to reckon with his immediate neighbors, especially if the United States leaves. Negotiations with the Syrian government about reuniting the northeast with the rest of the country have gone nowhere, he said, and the Trump administration has discouraged further talks.

And the more powerful Mazlum’s forces get, the more they scare Turkey, which has threatened to send troops across the border to get rid of what it considers a growing security threat. Meanwhile, Kurdish fighters have dug extensive tunnels near the border to fight back in case the Turks attack.

Mazlum said that he needed more support from the United States-led coalition, not less, but that his forces would survive regardless.

“Of course it will be hard,” he said. “But if we end up on our own, we’ll continue the war as we did in the time before the coalition.”

TWO RADICALLY DIFFERENT VIEWS OF THE SAME PERSON

Mazlum Kobani, who is 52, remains a mysterious figure, with basic facts about



Soldiers attached to the Syrian Democratic Forces, checking IDs at a checkpoint on the outskirts of the northern city of Manbij.

Credit Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

him subject to debate, including his real name. When asked directly, he acknowledged that he had been a longtime member of the P.K.K., which the United States and Turkey consider a terrorist organization.

That is history, he said.

“The Turks are focused on the period before 2011,” he said, “but we are looking ahead.”

He offered only snippets about his background, saying he was arrested repeatedly by the Syrian government and later went to Europe for “political work,” followed by “military work” in Iraq.

Officials from the United States and Turkey speak about him as if describing two different people.

“He is a very educated, savvy politician

and a very effective front-line soldier,” said another American official who has worked with Mazlum. “He is the head of a highly disciplined and, to some degree, ideological movement that is centrally controlled and has a long history of fighting.”

Turkey focuses on that history. Officials in the Turkish Foreign Ministry provided documents about his background, which included overseeing an armed wing that launched deadly attacks on Turkish security forces. Officials in Iraq provided similar details.

Can Acun, a researcher with SETA, a pro-government think tank in Turkey, said Mazlum’s history raised concerns that his forces could use Syria as a base for future attacks on Turkey. The fact that he was supported by the United States, Turkey’s NATO ally, only made it worse.

“Turkey doesn’t want northeast Syria to become a safe zone for the P.K.K.,” Mr. Acun said.

More than a half-dozen American officials who have worked with Mazlum acknowledged his ties to the P.K.K. “Life is complicated in the Middle East,” the second United States official said.

He said joining forces with Mazlum had been necessary to fight the Islamic State, which was the overwhelming American interest in Syria.

“We owe these guys a lot,” he said. “And they owe us a lot.”

Ben Hubbard reported from Rmeilan, and Eric Schmitt from Washington. Follow Ben Hubbard on Twitter: @NYTBen.



Photographs commemorate the men and women from Kobani, a Kurdish Syrian town, who died in the fight against ISIS.

Credit Ivor Prickett for The New York Times

A la rencontre des enfants-soldats de Daech



Des centaines d'enfants, enrôlés ces dernières années, sont en prison ou livrés à eux-mêmes dans des camps en Irak.

1/20

Plusieurs milliers de mineurs ont été incarcérés pour appartenance à Daech, souvent après des aveux obtenus sous la torture.

À leur sortie de prison, ces jeunes restent coincés dans des camps de déplacés sans perspective de retour dans leur région d'origine.

Nord de l'Irak
De notre envoyé spécial

Ahmed, Saïd et Mohammed (1) nous reçoivent dans une petite pièce aux murs gris où s'engouffrent les courants d'air. Une théière siffle sur un poêle à mazout. Depuis leur sortie de prison, cet hiver, les adolescents vivent dans ce petit baraquement en bordure d'un camp de déplacés avec des dizaines d'autres garçons condamnés, comme eux, pour terrorisme. Mille cinq cents mineurs sont aujourd'hui retenus dans les geôles irakiennes et kurdes pour appartenance à Daech, selon l'ONG Human Rights Watch (HRW).

À leur libération, ils demeurent surveillés par les services de renseignement, qui leur interdisent toute communication avec les journalistes. Des enfants-soldats considérés comme victimes au regard du droit international, mais jugés coupables par leur gouvernement. Eux racontent être passés aux aveux sous la torture. Après des semaines d'enquête, *La Croix* a finalement pu rencontrer certains d'entre eux.

Dans le camp, où se mêlent des familles de déplacés et quelques dizaines de repris de justice condamnés pour terrorisme, l'atmosphère est délétère, nos interlocuteurs méfiants. « *Daech a encore une très forte emprise sur beaucoup de jeunes ici, glisse un travailleur humanitaire. Certains sont toujours en lien avec l'organisation et exercent une pression sur les autres.* »

Dans les ruelles boueuses qui quadrillent les baraquements, parcourues en silence, les regards sont hostiles. « *Tout le monde nous traite de terroristes* », soupire Saïd, 18 ans à peine. « *Bien sûr, certains d'entre nous étaient djihadistes, d'autres étaient proches de l'organisation*

ou avaient des membres de leur famille qui soutenaient Daech. Mais il y a surtout des gars condamnés à tort », assure celui qui est devenu un jeune homme, le visage encore marqué par l'acné juvénile sous ses cheveux blonds. « *C'est mon cas.* »

Un discours tenu par la majorité des adolescents rencontrés. Tous racontent être passés aux aveux sous la torture. « *Ils auraient pu me faire dire n'importe quoi* », confie Mohammed, s'assurant que personne d'autre ne peut l'entendre. Arrêté il y a deux ans et demi par les peshmergas, les combattants kurdes, en première ligne dans la lutte contre Daech, le garçon qui mesure à présent un mètre quatre-vingt-dix, la barbe taillée, assure avoir été maintenu à genoux pen-

« Que le suspect ait été ou non membre de Daech, ils le tortureront jusqu'à ce qu'il avoue. »

dant des jours dans une cellule, entièrement nu, les poignets liés dans le dos, un bras tordu pardessus son épaule. « *Ils appellent ça la position du scorpion. Les gardes me frappaient avec une barre en plastique jusqu'à ce qu'elle se brise, puis ils me l'enfonçaient dans l'anus.* » Des sévices confirmés par ses camarades, dont certains ajoutent qu'ils ont été enfermés dans de minuscules pièces, un sac en plastique sur la tête. « *À cet instant, vous n'avez plus d'air. Vous vous sentez comme un criminel.* »

Si la plupart nient tout lien avec le groupe terroriste, Ahmed, libéré cet hiver, admet avoir rejoint Daech il y a cinq ans. À voix basse, le timbre usé par les cigarettes, il confie : « *À l'époque, j'avais 13 ans. Le califat venait tout juste d'être proclamé. Daech était devenu ●●● un gouvernement et même s'ils étaient un peu extrémistes, ils avaient fait revenir le calme dans mon village. Nous vivions en sécurité. Beaucoup de mes copains étaient membres de l'organisation, alors c'était excitant, je voulais m'amuser avec eux.* » Un engagement par défaut, motivé par la pauvreté, la frustration, l'ennui. « *Les salafistes nous promettaient une femme, un salaire, une voiture et des armes. Tout ce dont je pouvais rêver* », sourit-il.

Région autonome du Kurdistan



Mais dès son arrivée dans le camp djihadiste, le fantasme s'évapore. Le jeune homme se souvient des insultes, des coups et des balles de kalachnikov frôlant son visage lorsqu'il ne satisfaisait pas les exigences de ses instructeurs. Il décide de s'enfuir. En vain. Ahmed est rapidement rattrapé par les djihadistes, qui le jettent en prison.

Libéré après plusieurs semaines, il parvient à rejoindre le territoire contrôlé par les peshmergas. « *J'ai fui côté kurde, car je pensais qu'ils respectaient les droits de l'homme.* » Nouvelle désillusion : l'adolescent est immédiatement arrêté. « *Ils savaient que j'avais fait partie de Daech, ils n'allaient pas me chatouiller ! Évidemment, ils m'ont torturé, mais j'aurais fait pareil à leur place. Sans ça, personne n'aurait voulu avoir été djihadiste* », poursuit-il.

Dans l'Irak post-Daech, une suspicion généralisée règne à l'encontre des jeunes comme Ahmed en raison de leur identité sunnite, la branche de l'islam dont se revendique l'organisation. Condamné à deux ans de prison par un système judiciaire expéditif en quête de coupables, le jeune homme s'estime néanmoins chanceux d'avoir fini aux mains des Kurdes plutôt qu'ailleurs en Irak. « *Je connais des gars comme moi qui ont pris quinze ans devant des tribunaux irakiens. Et puis, le centre de détention pour mineurs d'Erbil (la capitale du Kurdistan irakien, NDLR) était un vrai jardin d'enfants.* »

Par manque de preuve et pour obtenir des aveux, les autorités irakiennes ont fréquemment recours à la torture, selon Human Rights Watch. « *Dans les faits, les enquêteurs n'ont pas d'autre moyen pour instruire le dossier que d'obtenir des confessions*, explique Belkis Wille représentante de HRW en Irak. *Que le suspect ait été ou non membre de Daech, ils le tortureront jusqu'à ce qu'il avoue.* »

Des accusations contestées par le gouvernement autonome du Kurdistan. « Nos prisons sont ouvertes aux organisations humanitaires, certifie Dindar Zebari, coordonnateur de l'action internationale du gouvernement. *Donnez-moi une seule instance internationale, hormis HRW, qui nous accuse de torture. Il n'y en a aucune!* » Ce dernier assure que les victimes n'ont déposé aucune plainte.

De leur côté, les mineurs affirment que les juges ont délibérément ignoré leurs témoignages. « Les procès sont joués d'avance. Qu'on nie ou qu'on avoue, l'issue est la même », conclut Mohammed. Des comparutions expéditives, le plus souvent sans avocat ni traducteur pour ces jeunes Arabes, alors que la procédure se déroule en langue kurde.

Malgré leurs condamnations, la plupart des mineurs continuent de clamer leur innocence. Tous cultivent l'espoir de rentrer dans leur région d'origine, en Irak fédé-

ral, sans repasser par la case prison. Un vœu pieux : la justice irakienne ne reconnaît pas les peines effectuées dans la région autonome du Kurdistan.

« *Même s'il a purgé sa peine, un Arabe condamné par les Kurdes pour appartenance à Daech ne peut rentrer chez lui, souligne Belkis Wille. S'il souhaite retourner en Irak fédéral, il s'expose à une nouvelle arrestation par l'armée irakienne ou une milice qui contrôle sa région.* » Ces jeunes, souvent élevés dans l'idéologie salafiste, restent donc cloîtrés ensemble, sans perspective, juridiquement libres mais toujours prisonniers. Une injustice qui fait obstacle à tout processus de réconciliation nationale et propice à de nouvelles frustrations. « *Mon avenir est foutu, soupire Ahmed qui a quitté l'école il y a cinq ans. Rien ni personne ne pourra me le rendre. C'est fini.* »

Noé Pignède

(1) Les prénoms ont été changés.



Des mineurs, capturés par les forces kurdes en mars. Ils sont suspectés d'avoir été des combattants de Daech.

Bulent Kilit/AFP

Plus de 1 500 mineurs sont détenus dans les prisons irakiennes et kurdes pour appartenance à Daech. De nombreux autres, libérés, sont parqués dans des camps.

entretien

LA CROIX lundi 13 mai 2019

« Les prisons irakiennes redeviennent une école des mouvements djihadistes »

Adel Bakawan

Directeur du Centre de sociologie de l'Irak, auteur de *L'Impossible État irakien* (1).

— Le sociologue revient sur les raisons qui ont poussé les jeunes générations à rejoindre Daech et sur les conséquences pour l'Irak de leur emprisonnement.

Quelle utilisation Daech a-t-il fait des enfants-soldats irakiens et syriens ?

Adel Bakawan : L'organisation avait une stratégie de socialisation des enfants autour de son idéologie, qu'elle a appliquée en prenant en charge leur éducation psychologique et physique. Aussi, certains de ces enfants ont participé à des opérations suicides, d'autres ont été utilisés au combat, d'autres encore pour passer des messages d'une ville à l'autre. Certains sont morts, mais la majorité sont encore vivants.

Comment Daech

a-t-il réussi à les attirer ?

A. B. : L'immense majorité d'entre eux vient des territoires sunnites, marqués par de profonds problèmes économiques, sociaux et politiques. Le taux de chômage parmi les jeunes y varie de 55 % à 75 %, le système d'éducation est moyenâgeux, les services publics sont absents. Il y a un vide politique. Aussi, la « débaasification » (censée éradiquer le parti Baas, tout-puissant sous Saddam Hussein, qui avait favorisé les sunnites – 30 % de la population –, NDLR) s'est transformée en « dé-sunnification ». Cela a participé à l'intégration dans Daech de ces nouvelles générations sans perspective.

Les enfants-soldats ne sont pas considérés comme une priorité par la justice irakienne. Quelles peuvent en être les conséquences ?

A. B. : L'avenir des enfants-soldats de Daech et les enjeux qu'ils représentent ne sont pas même considérés comme des questions, ce qui tient à la nature du système judiciaire irakien, traversé par la

corruption et des crises communautaires et politiques. Pour comprendre les conséquences de cette situation, il faut remonter à la période 2006-2011.

À l'époque, la victoire sur les djihadistes a été proclamée en Irak, et les États-Unis ont décidé de s'en retirer. Selon eux, le pays ne réunissait plus les conditions objectives de la menace. Or, dans les prisons irakiennes à ce moment-là, les détenus élaboraient des stratégies d'action, mises en œuvre après les printemps arabes. Aujourd'hui, les entretiens des sociologues le montrent : les prisons irakiennes redeviennent une école des mouvements djihadistes. On dénombre, depuis février, près de 45 opérations de Daech en Irak : explosions, prises d'otages, assassinats...

Voulez-vous dire que Daech n'est pas mort ?

A. B. : Non, il n'est pas mort, contrairement à la vision de l'Occident, de la France en particulier, selon laquelle l'Irak est redevenue le pivot du Moyen-Orient. Mais comment peut-on y parler de stabilité ? Un an après les élections lé-

gislatives, il n'y a toujours pas de ministres de la défense, de l'intérieur, de la justice ! La France, en réalité, ne voit pas d'autre interlocuteur au Moyen-Orient, compte tenu de la situation en Turquie, en Syrie, en Arabie saoudite...

Comment inverser la tendance à la radicalisation ?

A. B. : Il faut entrer dans un processus de conciliation nationale. Je ne parle pas de « réconciliation », car les élites n'ont jamais réussi à créer une identité irakienne : les chiites se définissent d'abord comme chiites, les sunnites d'abord comme sunnites... Il faut construire une identité irakienne inclusive : qui ne supprime pas l'identité kurde, sunnite, chrétienne... Cela passe par le dialogue intercommunautaire et la mise en place de lieux de rencontre. À titre d'exemple, aujourd'hui, un sunnite ne peut pas aller étudier à Bassorah (à majorité chiite, NDLR), ni un chiite à Mossoul (à majorité sunnite, NDLR)!

Recueilli par Marianne Meunier

(1) *L'Harmattan, mars 2019, 186 pages.*

Le Monde MARDI 14 MAI 2019

Les universitaires, cibles du gouvernement turc

Enseignant à Lyon, le mathématicien Tuna Altinel a été arrêté pour avoir participé en France à une réunion sur les Kurdes

ISTANBUL - correspondante

Maitre de conférences à l'université Claude-Bernard Lyon-I en France, le mathématicien turc Tuna Altinel a été arrêté et placé en détention provisoire, samedi 11 mai en Turquie, sous l'accusation de «propagande en faveur d'une organisation terroriste». Inédites, son arrestation et les charges qui pèsent contre lui attestent, une fois de plus, du recul des droits et des libertés en Turquie où les universitaires sont persécutés pour leurs convictions.

Début 2016, il avait signé, avec près de 2 000 collègues, une pétition réclamant la fin des opérations militaires qui faisaient rage dans les villes kurdes du sud-est du pays. Près de 700 universitaires sont aujourd'hui poursuivis en justice à cause de cette pétition en faveur de la paix, assimilée désormais à un acte de propagande en faveur du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), la bête noire d'Ankara. Parmi eux, 191 ont été condamnés à des peines allant de 15 mois à 3 ans de prison.

Installé en France depuis vingt-trois ans, titulaire d'un passeport turc, Tuna Altinel ne s'est jamais dérobé à la justice de son pays. Poursuivi pour avoir signé la pétition, il est venu en Turquie le 28 février pour déposer devant un tribunal, après quoi il a pu rentrer à Lyon sans encombre, ne faisant l'objet d'aucune condamnation.

Les ennuis ont commencé au deuxième voyage, le 12 avril, dès son arrivée à l'aéroport. Au contrôle des passeports, il a été emmené par un policier dans un bureau. Après un interrogatoire sur son engagement politique et ses liens avec des organisations kurdes, son passeport lui est retiré, «invalidé», lui dit-on. La mesure étant illégale – il faut une décision de justice pour priver quelqu'un de son passeport –, le document est officiellement déclaré «perdu».

Tuna Altinel quitte donc l'aéroport sans passeport. Il ne peut plus quitter le pays et doit renoncer à rentrer à Lyon donner ses cours. Commence alors un parcours du combattant dans les méandres de l'administration. Il

se rend à Balikesir, une ville de la région de Marmara, où le passeport a été émis.

Activités scrutées

Vendredi 10 mai, il débarque à la préfecture en quête d'explications... et en repart quelques heures plus tard avec les menottes. Le lendemain, il est placé en détention provisoire pour avoir participé à une conférence sur



les Kurdes de Turquie à Lyon. L'événement, organisé par une amicale kurde le 21 février, a eu lieu en présence d'un député en exil du Parti démocratique des peuples (HDP, pro-kurde, troisième formation au Parlement) pour la ville de Cizre, encerclée et détruite par les combats de l'hiver 2015-2016 au prix de nombreux morts civils.

Les participants à la conférence semblent avoir été passés au crible par les services turcs. Cette pratique est devenue courante ces dernières années envers les intellectuels et les opposants turcs à l'étranger. Ces renseignements servent ensuite à bâtir des dos-

siers d'accusation, comme c'est le cas pour Tuna Altinel, qui risque plusieurs années de prison.

Mardi 7 mai, sa collègue Füsün Üstel, 64 ans, signataire elle aussi de la pétition pour la paix, est entrée à la prison pour femmes d'Eskisehir (centre de la Turquie) pour y purger une peine de 15 mois. Elle est la première universitaire écrouée, sur les 191 condamnés. Cette enseignante retraitée de l'université francophone Galatasaray à Istanbul a refusé le marché qui lui était proposé par le juge : un sursis en échange de la reconnaissance de sa culpabilité. ■

MARIE JÉGO

Le Parisien

JEUDI 16 MAI 2019

ENQUÊTE

Triple meurtre à Paris : sur la piste des commanditaires

COUP DE THÉÂTRE dans une affaire aux forts relents de crime politique. La justice française s'apprête à relancer l'enquête sur l'assassinat de trois militantes kurdes, le 9 janvier 2013, à Paris. Les corps de Sakine Cansiz, 54 ans, l'une des fondatrices du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan, de Fidan Dogan, 28 ans, et de Leyla Saylemez, 24 ans, sont retrouvés criblés de balles dans un appartement près de la gare du Nord. Rapidement, les soupçons s'orientent vers un jeune Turc, Omer Güney, qui s'était rendu indispensable à la communauté kurde.

Au terme de leurs investigations, les juges français tiennent pour acquis l'«accountance» de Güney avec le MIT, «le service de renseignement turc avec lequel il était en contact». Les policiers ont en effet découvert que le suspect avait photographié un fichier recensant les membres d'une association et qu'il avait effectué de troublants allers-retours à Ankara. Sans compter, en janvier 2014, cette mystérieuse diffusion sur YouTube d'un enregistrement où l'on entend un homme – identifié comme Güney – discuter des détails de l'opération d'assassinat avec un agent.

AFP - PAIRIK HERTZOG



Strasbourg (Bas-Rhin), le 15 février 2014. Des Kurdes manifestent pour demander la vérité sur la mort des trois militantes.

Mis en examen pour assassinats, l'intéressé a nié jusqu'au bout toute implication. En décembre 2016, Güney meurt en prison en France d'une tumeur au cerveau, après avoir fomenté une tentative d'évasion et alors que son procès va s'ouvrir. En droit, cette disparition de l'auteur présumé signe «l'extinction de l'action publique», c'est-à-dire la fin des poursuites. Le rideau tombe sur l'une des plus sombres affaires d'espionnage de la période contemporaine.

DE NOUVEAUX INDICES VENUS DE TURQUIE

C'est sans compter la détermination des parties civiles à faire rouvrir le dossier. En mars 2018, les familles des victimes déposent une plainte avec constitution de partie civile particulièrement détaillée. Elles mettent en avant des arguments de droit, estimant que si l'auteur présumé est mort, il reste à trouver les «tous autres», c'est-à-dire les complices et/ou les commanditaires, visés dans l'enquête initiale. Elles appor-

tent aussi à la justice française de nouveaux indices issus de la procédure turque, comme ce «numéro attribué par les télécommunications turques à la direction du MIT auprès du Premier ministre».

Le parquet de Paris a donc décidé de relancer l'affaire en désignant un nouveau juge d'instruction antiterroriste chargé d'enquêter sur les complicités dont aurait bénéficié Güney. «Dans une affaire d'assassinat politique, on admet pour la première fois que tout n'a pas été fait pour retrouver les coupables. Ce faisant, on ouvre la porte à des poursuites contre les commanditaires, se réjouit M^e Antoine Comte, l'une des chevilles ouvrières de l'affaire. C'est le coup de pied dans la fourmière.» Le MIT, de son côté, dément toute responsabilité dans le triple assassinat. Les investigations risquent de tendre un peu plus les relations diplomatiques entre Ankara et Paris.

ERIC PELLETIER

Speculation Grows in Turkey After Jailed Kurdish Leader Allowed to See Lawyers

Dorian Jones / May 08, 2019
www.voanews.com

ISTANBUL — Turkey's surprise move to allow Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), to meet with his lawyers after an eight-year hiatus is spurring speculation of a shift in Ankara's hard-line policy following the 2015 collapse in peace talks with the rebel group.

A nationwide hunger strike calling for an end to Ocalan's isolation spurred Turkish authorities to allow his lawyers a visit at Imrali Island prison where the 70-year-old Kurdish leader is being held.

"The lawyers were informed they could meet Ocalan on the day of the announcement of a death fast [hunger strike leading to death], which involves at least 2 or 3,000, which has put the government in a difficult position," said Ertugrul Kurkcu, honorary president of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

In a statement, Ocalan called on his supporters not to engage in activities that could harm them. What drew the most attention, however, was the rebel leader's call to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that "Turkish sensitivity should be taken into consideration."

TURKEY ON THE BORDER

Turkish forces are currently amassed on the Syrian border facing off against the SDF. Ankara accuses the People Protection Units (YPG), which makes up a large part of the SDF, of being a terrorist organization linked to the PKK. The PKK has waged a decades-long insurgency inside Turkey.

"I think he is showing the YPG the limits they should remain within in the Syrian context and not bother the Turkish government," said Kurkcu. "He [Ocalan] seeks to finalize the situation without any losses of Syrian Kurdish population because Turkey is looking for an opportunity to intervene."

Washington has been lobbying hard to prevent a Turkish intervention because the YPG is a crucial ally in its war against Islamic State. U.S. Special Representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, visited Ankara earlier this month for high-level talks to broker a solution.

"We know James Jeffrey, the former U.S. ambassador to Ankara, is already the go-between to find the middle ground between the Ankara regime and the Kurdish political movement, be it in Turkey or Syria," said political scientist Cengiz Aktar.

"So, the Ocalan lawyers' visit could be a proposal by him, because Ocalan is considered the symbolic leader of the YPG. We know from the Kurdish authorities in Syria that James Jeffrey was active to establish an indirect dia-



FILE - Turkish Kurd leader Abdullah Ocalan's lawyers, left to right, Faik Ozgur Erol, Newroz Uysal and Rezan Sarica prepare to read Ocalan's message during a press conference in Istanbul, May 6, 2019.

logue between Ankara and [YPG leader] Mazlum Kobane," Aktar added.

OCALAN'S INFLUENCE

Former senior Turkish diplomat Aydin Selcen, who founded Turkey's consul in the Iraqi Kurdistan regional capital, Irbil, said the significance of Ocalan's statement should not be overestimated.

"Will it change anything on the ground? I am not sure, because on the ground, even the relationship between Qandil [PKK Iraqi headquarters] and the YPG commanders is quite opaque, not clear, let alone Ocalan's influence," he said.

Selcen added, "What is the most interesting point is whether now there is some sort of coordination between the United States, the SDF, Ankara and Ocalan, and even perhaps between Qandil. That we shall see in the coming months."

Reports of tentative communications between Ankara and the SDF, coupled with Ocalan's lawyers' meeting, is spurring speculation of a possible resumption of broader PKK peace talks.

Turkish government members previously



FILE - A column of armored Turkish military vehicles drives on a patrol along a road in the de-militarized zone in Syria's northern Idlib province near the town Saraqib, March 8, 2019.



FILE - A banner with a picture of imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan is seen during a protest in Qamishli, Syria, Jan. 30, 2018.

engaged in peace talks with Ocalan, which were accompanied by a PKK cease-fire and a partial withdrawal from Turkey.

The process collapsed in 2015 amid mutual recrimination. The resulting fighting claimed thousands of lives and the destruction of numerous town and city centers across Turkey's predominately Kurdish region.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is ruling out a return to peace talks.

"There is no question of such a thing as the peace process," he said Monday.

Erdogan's AKP is in a coalition with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which is ardently opposed to any peace talks.

"It's [the AKP-MHP coalition] a problem, but it is also an opportunity," Selcen said. "It might mean Erdogan can change his coalition. It might mean he can opt for a new partner."

GROWING TENSIONS?

Turkish media have been awash with reports of growing tensions between the AKP and MHP, which have been exacerbated by the political defeat in most of Turkey's main cities, including Istanbul, during the local elections in March.

Kurkcu played down hopes of new peace talks.

"The present line of the PKK is devoted to changing the interlocutor, changing the negotiating partner, which they believe cannot be the AKP," he said. "The credit the AKP had five to six or seven years ago has vanished in tyranny. The AKP doesn't have the promise for any positive change in Turkey. It only offers dictatorship."

Kurkcu confirmed that the HDP would again back Ekrem Imamoglu of the opposition CHP, who won the Istanbul mayoral election in March but is re-running after the AKP succeeded in having the vote annulled over claims of voting irregularities. ♦



May 10, 2019

Former leader of short-lived Soviet Kurdish republic buried in Erbil

Sangar Ali / May 10-2019 <http://www.kurdistan24.net/>

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24) – The former president of a short-lived Kurdish republic known as Lachin was buried on Friday in the capital of the autonomous Kurdistan Region.

Born in 1934, Wekil Mustafayev passed away on April 19 in Brussels at the age of 85. His body was later received in the Kurdistan Region by several Kurdish political leaders and was then laid to rest in a ceremony in Erbil, as he requested in his will.

The little-known Kurdish republic was a Soviet administrative unit that first existed for six years from 1923 to 1929 and briefly re-emerged in another form in the 1990s. It was also called Red Kurdistan or Kurdistansky Uyezd and was part of Soviet Azerbaijan. Its administrative center was in Lachin.

On April 8, 1929, the Uyezd was dissolved and on May 30, 1930, Kurdistan Okrug was founded in its place. The Okrug included the territory of former Uyezd and also the Zangilansky District and a part of Dzhembrailsky District.

The Okrug was believed to have been created by Soviet authorities in order to attract the sympathies of Kurds in neighboring Iran and Turkey and take advantage of Kurdish movements in those countries. However, due to protests of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was concerned that open support of a Kurdish movement could damage relations with Turkey and Iran, the Okrug was liquidated on July 23, 1930.

In 1992, after the capture of Lachin by Armenian forces during the Nagorno-Karabakh War, Lachin was declared in Armenia by Kurds led by Mustafayev.

After the dissolution of the republic, most of the Kurds in Lachin



Photo of Wekil Mustafayev and map of the Kurdish Republic of Lachin at a funeral ceremony in Erbil, May 10, 2019. (Photo: Kurdistan 24)

moved to other Azerbaijani areas, with Mustafayev fleeing to Italy.

“He dedicated all his life for the freedom of the Kurdish people,” Mustafayev’s nephew Bahaddin told Kurdistan 24 while standing next to the grave in Erbil.

“He was very happy to see the Kurdistan independence referendum taking place in the region,” he added. ♦

The Economist

MAY 14th 2019

Istanbul's mayoral election

Why Erdogan needs the Kurds if he hopes to win a repeat election

A strongman is forced to woo his opponents

May 14th 2019 | ISTANBUL
<https://www.economist.com>

FOR EIGHT years, Turkey’s public enemy number one, Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), had not been allowed to meet his lawyers. Hundreds of other Kurdish inmates went on hunger strike in late 2018 to demand an end to his isolation. At least eight committed suicide. The blackout ended on May 2nd, when a pair of lawyers visited Mr Ocalan in his island prison on the Marmara Sea, where he has been held for nearly two decades.

The news was quickly overshadowed by

political drama. Only four days after the visit Turkey’s election board voted to overturn the outcome of a mayoral election in Istanbul, in which the opposition scored a remarkable upset, and ordered a repeat.

The two decisions, to reopen channels with Mr Ocalan and to try to overturn the mayoral vote, could not have happened without the involvement of Turkey’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, analysts say. Many of them see a connection.

More than any other group, it was Kurdish



FILE PHOTO: A man holds a flag with a picture of imprisoned Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan during a gathering to celebrate Newroz, which marks the arrival of spring and the new year, in Istanbul, Turkey March 21, 2018. REUTERS/Murad

voters who helped the opposition’s candidate for Istanbul mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, score a narrow victory in late March.

Displaced from villages and towns in Turkey’s south-east by decades of war between the PKK and the army, as well as poverty, millions of Kurds have settled in the west of the country. Istanbul’s population of 15m people includes at least 2m Kurds, more than in

any city in the mainly Kurdish south-east of the country. Most of them support the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), an alliance of liberals and Kurdish nationalists, which did not field its own candidate in the Istanbul vote, and endorsed Mr Imamoglu instead. On election day over 80% of the HDP's voters backed Mr Imamoglu, according to research by TEPAV, a think-tank. The remainder appear to have abstained.

To win the repeat election, Mr Erdogan's Justice and Development (AK) party might have to reel in at least some of the abstainers, as well as conservative Kurds, to secure the election of its candidate, a former prime minister, Binali Yildirim. "Erdogan's loss has entirely to do with Kurdish dissent," says Asli Aydintasbas, a

fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. "He might have to pivot to the Kurds simply to keep power."

The decision to allow Mr Ocalan to meet his lawyers appears to be part of the outreach, says Ms Aydintasbas. The move comes amid rumours that Turkish spooks recently met members of the PKK's Syrian franchise, known as the YPG, to discuss a possible "safe zone" in Syria's north-east. Despite opposition from America, which teamed up with the YPG to crush Islamic State's "caliphate", Mr Erdogan's government has repeatedly threatened to attack the YPG's strongholds in Syria. In a statement passed on to his lawyers, Mr Ocalan called on Turkey and the Kurdish insurgents to shun violence and pursue a settlement "within the

framework of a united Syria."

To make any new inroads with Kurdish voters ahead of the repeat election in Istanbul, scheduled for June 23rd, Mr Erdogan will have to do much more than put out feelers to the PKK's leader. During his first decade in power, Turkey's strongman offered the Kurds new cultural rights and launched peace talks with the separatists. Over the past four years, however, he has presided over ruthless army operations against PKK fighters in cities across the south-east, the arrests of thousands of Kurdish activists, an alliance with Turkish ultranationalists, plus what many Kurds consider a land grab in Syria's Afrin province. Mr Erdogan has just over a month to chip away at that legacy. He may be too late. ♦



ALJAZEERA

14 May 2019

Erdogan tells Putin : Syrian gov't 'seeking to sabotage' Turkey-Russia relations

Turkey's Erdogan says de-escalation deal signed with Russia at risk as Syrian government presses on with Idlib assault.

14 May 2019 <https://www.aljazeera.com>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accused the Syrian government of "seeking to sabotage" Ankara's relationship with Moscow through its latest offensive in the northwest of the war-torn country.

Clashes in Idlib province, the last rebel-held stronghold, have killed at least 42 fighters in 24 hours, a United Kingdom-based war monitor said on Monday, and the government bombardment on the region has devastated health services.

On Monday, rebels said they mounted a counterattack against government forces in northwest Syria.

Idlib's nearly three million residents are supposed to be protected by a so-called "de-militarised" buffer zone through a deal signed last September by Russia and Turkey that was meant to avert a fully-fledged assault on Idlib.

During a phone call late on Monday, Erdogan told his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, that the offensive by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's forces "sought to sabotage Turkish-Russian cooperation", according to a Twitter post by Fahrettin Altun, communications director at the Turkish presidency.

Russia and Turkey are on opposing sides of the conflict, with Moscow strongly supporting Assad's militarily since 2015, while Ankara supported Syrian rebels in the war since it began in 2011.

Both have worked closely, along with Iran - Assad's ally - to find a political solution to the conflict.

'ALARMING DIMENSION'

Erdogan lamented that "the regime's ceasefire violations targeting the Idlib de-escalation zone over the last two weeks have reached an alarming dimension".

He said it was impossible to explain it as a counterterrorism effort given the number of casualties and damage to health services.

Syria's war: NGOs suspend aid to embattled Idlib province (2:46)

The biggest group in control of much of Idlib is Hay'et Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate that is independent of the Turkish-backed umbrella of opposition factions in the region.

HTS has been designated a "terrorist" group by Russia, and its presence has been used as a justification for intensified attacks despite



The latest government-led offensive has uprooted more than 150,000 people, the UN said [File: Muhammed Abdullah/Anadolu]

the de-escalation agreement.

The Turkish leader also warned that the attacks risked undermining the fate of the political process in Syria.

On Tuesday, Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar also spoke by phone with his Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu to discuss "measures to de-escalate tensions" in Idlib, the state-run Anadolu news agency reported.

The latest government-led offensive that began on April 28 has displaced more than 150,000 people, the United Nations said, the biggest escalation in the war since last summer.

Last week, Syrian government forces captured the town of Qalaa al-Madiq in northwest Syria. They also launched ground operations against the southern flank of the rebel zone consisting of Idlib and parts of adjacent provinces.

The UN has called for all sides to abide by the deal signed in September 2018 with the objective of avoiding a humanitarian disaster and preventing an influx of refugees from entering bordering Turkey.

Since the start of the conflict in Syria, more than 400,000 people have been killed, and millions have been displaced. ●

REUTERS

U.S. pressures Baghdad over Iran-backed militias

(Reuters) -May 15, 2019 Ahmed Rasheed, John Davison

BAGHDAD / Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's surprise visit to Baghdad this month came after U.S. intelligence showed Iran-backed Shi'ite militias positioning rockets near bases housing U.S. forces, according to two Iraqi security sources.

He told Iraq's top brass to keep the militias, which are expanding their power in Iraq and now form part of its security apparatus, in check, the sources said. If not, the U.S. would respond with force.

As tensions between Washington and Tehran increase, Iraq finds itself caught between neighboring Iran, whose regional influence has grown in recent years, and the United States.

"The message from the Americans was clear. They wanted guarantees that Iraq would stop those groups threatening U.S. interests," a senior Iraqi military source with knowledge of Pompeo's trip said.

"They said if the U.S. were attacked on Iraqi soil, it would take action to defend itself without coordinating with Baghdad."

The U.S. State Department declined to comment on the details of Pompeo's discussions. He had said after the trip: "We don't want anyone interfering in their country (Iraq), certainly not by attacking another nation inside of Iraq."

The second Iraqi security source said: "Communications intercepted by the Americans showed some militia groups redeployed to take up suspicious positions, which the Americans considered provocations."

He said the Iraqis were told that any threat from the groups "would be dealt with directly by the Americans with force."

Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi on Tuesday told reporters that the Iraqi side had not observed "movements that constitute a threat to any side. We clarified that to the Americans - the government is doing its duty to protect all parties."

Tensions between Washington and Tehran intensified early this month as U.S. President Donald Trump's administration stepped up sanctions pressure by ending waivers for some countries to purchase Iranian oil - part of efforts to roll back the Islamic Republic's expanding regional clout.

It also said last week it was sending additional military forces to the Middle East.

"PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE"

Iraq would struggle to rein in the Iran-backed militias.

The paramilitaries are formally part of Iraq's security forces but operate semi-independently, backed by powerful Iran-allied politicians, and are expanding their economic power.

Spokesmen for two Iran-backed paramilitary groups said there were no plans to target U.S. forces, saying talk of threats was "psychological warfare" by Washington.

The United States says Iran is the biggest threat to peace in the region. It wants to weaken the paramilitaries which have expanded their sway over land stretching to Syria and Lebanon, and for Iraq to decrease dependence on Iranian gas exports.

Iraq sees Iraq as an important link to the world in the face of U.S. sanctions, and analysts say the positioning of pro-Iran forces and rockets indicates Tehran is prepared at least to threaten the United States with violence.

The Iraqi security source said U.S. officials discussed with Iraqi officials Iran-backed militia deployed along the Syrian border, where U.S. troops have helped fight Islamic State.

Pompeo said last week: "We've urged the Iraqi government ... to get all of those forces under Iraqi central control."

The groups say they already follow the orders of the Iraqi state and are not planning to target U.S. interests.



FILE PHOTO: Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) fighters ride in a tank near the Iraqi-Syrian border in al-Qaim, Iraq. Iraq November 26, 2018. Picture taken November 26, 2018. REUTERS/Alaa al-Marjani/File Photo

"American claims are baseless. It reminds us of the big lie of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq," said Laith al-Athari, a spokesman for the Iran-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq group, referring to the pretext for the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), the umbrella grouping of mostly Shi'ite militias, numbers around 150,000 men.

There are currently an estimated 5,200 U.S. troops in Iraq, having peaked at 170,000 in the years following the invasion.

Analysts say the positioning of missiles by militias backed by Iran is likely meant as a symbolic threat to the United States, rather than a real plan to use them.

Professor Toby Dodge of the London School of Economics said Iran has in the past moved such weapons "to slowly ratchet up the heat under America in Iraq when it feels America is seeking to threaten Iran's interests."

ECONOMIC POWER

Some observers say economic pressure on Iran will have more impact than military action.

Pompeo said he discussed on his Baghdad visit "crude oil and natural gas ... (and) ways we could ... make those projects move forward very quickly," a reference to efforts to wean Iraq off crucial Iranian energy imports.

He urged Iraq to sign oil and power deals being negotiated with American companies, two energy officials said.

U.S. energy giant General Electric is seeking a share of a \$14 billion scheme to develop electricity infrastructure, and Iraq is close to signing a \$53 billion oil infrastructure contract which includes Exxon Mobil.

This is another way in which the United States is seeking to pressure Iraq's major electricity supplier Iran and force Iraq to choose between Washington and Tehran as its chief ally, said Renad Mansour, a research fellow at Chatham House.

"The U.S. is ... going to Iraqi leaders and saying you're either with us or with them," Mansour said.

"Iraqis have been saying why can't we be allies with both? But the Americans aren't interested in that and I think neither are the Iranians."

A Western diplomat said warned of the danger of a serious escalation.

"The atmosphere is no longer friendly ... (and) the White House does not seem to be concerned if Iraq is collateral damage," the diplomat said. ●

Dans le golfe Persique, la peur d'une guerre, la part de bluff

Par
PIERRE ALONSO

Pour une fois, le Guide suprême iranien et le chef de la diplomatie américaine sont d'accord. Personne ne cherche la guerre, ont affirmé mardi soir les deux hauts responsables, Ali Khamenei dans un discours reproduit sur son site, et Mike Pompeo depuis Sotchi, en Russie, lors d'une conférence de presse avec son homologue, Sergueï Lavrov. Dès mercredi matin pourtant, une décision de Washington confirmait et alimentait l'extrême tension qui règne depuis une semaine dans la région (*lire ci-contre*). Les Etats-Unis ont ordonné au personnel diplomatique non essentiel de quitter l'ambassade de Bagdad et le consulat d'Erbil. Le département d'Etat a publié le même jour une alerte de sécurité recommandant aux voyageurs de ne pas se rendre en Irak à cause des «*nombreux groupes terroristes et rebelles, [et] milices confessionnelles anti-américaines*». Sans citer nommément l'Irak, donc, même si depuis plusieurs jours, les Etats-Unis assurent que l'Irak pourrait devenir un terrain d'affrontement par procuration, Téhéran pouvant compter sur place sur de puissantes milices chiites.

RHÉTORIQUE

Cette affirmation a donné lieu à l'un des rares incidents entre alliés réunis au sein de la coalition contre l'Etat islamique, l'opération «*Inherent Resolve*». Son commandant adjoint, le général britannique Christopher Ghika, a affirmé mardi que «*non, la menace des forces soutenues par l'Irak en Irak et en Syrie n'a augmenté [ait] pas*»: «*Nous n'avons vu aucun changement dans l'attitude de [Hachd al-Chaabi, les milices pro-iraniennes en Irak] depuis l'échange récent entre les Etats-Unis et l'Irak, et nous espérons et nous attendons à ce que cela continue*». Sa déclaration a été suivie d'un communiqué en forme de recadrage de la part

du Central Command, la branche du Pentagone qui pilote les opérations dans cette région du monde: «*Les récents commentaires du commandant adjoint contredisent les menaces crédibles reçues des services de renseignement américains et alliés concernant les forces pro-iraniennes dans la région*». Mercredi, l'Allemagne et les Pays-Bas ont décidé de suspendre leur activité de formation militaire en Irak à cause des tensions, contrairement à la France, qui maintient son engagement actuel.

Ce débat à ciel ouvert entre hauts gradés de la coalition est d'autant plus gênant pour l'administration américaine que ces nouvelles menaces lui permettaient de justifier sa posture agressive (envoi de bombardiers B-52 sur leur base au Qatar, déploiement d'un porte-avions dans le Golfe et d'une batterie antiaérienne). Selon une enquête du *New York Times*, le ministre de la Défense par intérim, Patrick Shanahan, a présenté la semaine dernière un plan prévoyant d'envoyer jusqu'à 120 000 hommes dans la région en cas d'attaque iranienne contre des intérêts américains. Donald Trump a démenti, invoquant une «*fake news*» tout en se disant prêt à dépêcher «*beaucoup plus d'hommes que ça*» si nécessaire.

La «*pression maximale*», passée des sanctions économiques à des démonstrations de force militaire, place l'Irak dans une position délicate. Si le régime fait bloc en surface, un débat le parcourt sur la meilleure façon d'y répondre, selon Ariane Tabatabai, politologue à la Rand Corporation. Des désaccords à front renversé: «*Ce sont les durs du régime, ceux qui ont longtemps averti qu'on ne pouvait pas faire*

Des cargos dans le Golfe, près de la ville iranienne de Bandar Abbas, le 29 avril.
PHOTO ATTA KENARE. AFP



Après l'escalade des mots entre l'Irak et les Etats-Unis, Washington a rappelé mercredi des membres de son personnel diplomatique en Irak. Mais la justification américaine divise même ses alliés les plus proches.

confiance à Washington et qui s'opposaient à des discussions avec les administrations américaines et à l'accord sur le nucléaire, qui expliquent aujourd'hui que l'administration Trump, malgré sa rhétorique, n'est pas encline à entrer en guerre, et que ses récents déploiements militaires, très largement commentés dans les médias, ne sont pas inhabituels», écrit-elle dans le quotidien israélien *Haaretz*.

BOUCLIER

Au contraire, les «*réformateurs et modérés [considèrent] que les menaces américaines doivent être prises au sérieux*». Pour ces derniers, l'accord sur le nucléaire conclu à Vienne en 2015 constituait un bouclier contre un possible conflit ouvert. Rohani avait même averti qu'il aurait pu être aussi dévastateur que la guerre contre l'Irak, qui avait fait environ un million de morts entre 1980 et 1988.

«*Le processus de prise de décision en matière de sécurité nationale repose sur la recherche d'un consensus*», ajoute Ariane Tabatabai. Pour donner des gages à la frange la plus conservatrice du régime, de plus en plus impatiente, et répondre à la réimposition unilatérale et progressive de sanctions américaines depuis un an, Téhéran a annoncé qu'il ne respecterait plus certaines clauses de l'accord présentées comme secondaires. Une position médiane, et consensuelle, pour ne pas faire que subir et encaisser l'asphyxie économique du pays en mettant sous pression les autres puissances signataires attachées à l'accord. Mais sans aller jusqu'à le dénoncer, ce qui pourrait constituer un casus belli dans le contexte actuel. ◆

L'Irak, otage de la rivalité entre ses parrains américain et iranien

Les Etats-Unis, qui ont rappelé leur personnel diplomatique non essentiel, sont soupçonnés d'exagérer la menace des milices chiites

Ligne de friction et terrain de rivalité entre les Etats-Unis et l'Irak, l'Irak pouvait difficilement s'extraire de la montée des tensions entre ses deux parrains. Après une série d'incidents visant des intérêts pétroliers dans le Golfe ces derniers jours, les Etats-Unis ont invoqué un « flux de menaces accru » en Irak pour rappeler leur personnel diplomatique non essentiel de l'ambassade de Bagdad et du consulat d'Erbil, au Kurdistan irakien, mercredi 15 mai. Soupçonnée d'alimenter l'escalade en exagérant le niveau de la menace, l'administration américaine a justifié « une menace imminente contre [son] personnel ». Cette menace « est réelle », a insisté un haut responsable à Washington, évoquant la responsabilité de « milices irakiennes sous commandement et contrôle des gardiens de la révolution iraniens ».

Depuis la proclamation de la victoire contre l'organisation Etat islamique (EI) en décembre 2017, à laquelle Washington et Téhéran ont indirectement coopéré, les deux parrains se livrent une guerre d'influence en Irak. La décision du président américain, Donald Trump, de réinstaurer des sanctions économiques contre l'Irak, après son retrait de l'accord nucléaire en mai 2018, puis l'inscription, en avril, des gardiens de la révolution sur la liste américaine des « organisations terroristes » ont avivé les tensions.

Washington fait pression pour que Bagdad limite ses échanges avec son voisin iranien, partenaire économique incontournable dans des secteurs-clés, et réduise l'influence des milices chiites pro-iraniennes au sein de l'appareil sécuritaire. Ces dernières, entrées en force au Parlement en mai 2018, ont multiplié les provocations contre les Américains, sans toutefois réussir à rallier une majorité pour imposer le départ des troupes étrangères – dont 5200 soldats américains.



Mike Pompeo (à d.), lors de sa visite surprise en Irak, parle avec Joey Wood, le chargé d'affaire de l'ambassade américaine de Bagdad, le 7 mai 2019. Mandel Ngan / AP

Les milices chiites proches de l'Irak ont accusé Washington de se livrer à une « guerre psychologique »

Dans le contexte de « pression maximale » exercée depuis dix jours par Washington, présentée comme une réponse à des préparatifs iraniens d'attaques aux contours encore flous contre ses intérêts dans la région, le secrétaire d'Etat américain, Mike Pompeo, a effectué une visite surprise à Bagdad le 5 mai, pour partager avec les dirigeants irakiens « les informations qui indiquent une escalade des activités de l'Irak ». Selon plusieurs responsables militaires américains, le renseignement a constaté des mouvements d'armes et de groupes pro-iraniens à terre et en mer, et des instructions pour attaquer des intérêts américains comme des ambassades, des consulats ou des soldats.

Au terme de sa visite, Mike Pompeo a déclaré avoir reçu l'« assu-

rance » des autorités de Bagdad qu'elles protégeaient « de manière adéquate les Américains dans leur pays ». Cette assurance a été réitérée mardi par le premier ministre, Adel Abdel Mahdi, qui a indiqué que Bagdad n'avait relevé aucune activité menaçante des milices chiites pro-iraniennes. Une analyse qu'a partagée le général Chris Ghika, un porte-parole britannique de la coalition internationale, qui a démenti mardi toute « aggravation de la menace posée par les forces pro-iraniennes ».

Aucune activité menaçante

Le Pentagone et le département d'Etat se sont relayés pour minimiser et contredire ses propos. De leur côté, les armées allemande et néerlandaise, alliées des Etats-Unis au sein de la coalition anti-EI, ont annoncé avoir suspendu jusqu'à nouvel ordre leurs opérations de formation militaire en Irak. Berlin, qui déploie actuellement quelque 160 instructeurs sur place, a invoqué une « vigilance accrue », tandis qu'Amsterdam, qui dispose de 50 instructeurs, a évoqué des « menaces ». Le ministre français des armées a fait savoir à l'agence Reuters qu'« aucun changement de l'engagement fran-

çais en Irak n'a lieu actuellement ».

La position de neutralité dans laquelle M. Abdel Mahdi s'évertue à maintenir l'Irak pour éviter qu'elle ne devienne un terrain de confrontation entre les deux rivaux est un difficile équilibre. « Le problème est qu'il est considéré à Washington comme une excroissance iranienne. Sa marge de manœuvre est limitée. Il n'est pas en mesure d'imposer aux milices d'épargner le pays et de garder l'Irak neutre », estime Hosham Dawood, chercheur à l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales.

Les milices chiites proches de l'Irak ont nié toute intention de s'en prendre aux intérêts américains et accusé Washington de se livrer à une « guerre psychologique ». « Les accusations américaines sont sans fondement. Cela nous rappelle le mensonge des armes de destruction massive en Irak », a déclaré Laith al Athari, porte-parole du groupe pro-iranien Asaïb Ahl Al-Haq, en rappelant le prétexte utilisé par les Etats-Unis pour envahir l'Irak de Saddam Hussein en 2003.

De leur côté, les responsables américains ont assuré mercredi que ce rappel de diplomates n'était pas motivé par une action militaire imminente des Etats-Unis contre l'Irak ou ses groupes alliés, tandis que le président Trump a renouvelé ses appels au dialogue. « Je suis sûr que l'Irak vaudra bientôt discuter », a-t-il lancé sur Twitter. ■

HÉLÈNE SALLON

As U.S. warns of Iran threats, skeptics recall claims on Iraq

WASHINGTON

BY HELENE COOPER
AND EDWARD WONG

As the Trump administration draws up war plans against Iran over what it says are threats to American troops and interests, a senior British military official told reporters at the Pentagon that he saw no increased risk from Iran or allied militias in Iraq or Syria.

A few hours later, the United States Central Command issued an unusual rebuke. The remarks from the British official — Maj. Gen. Chris Ghika, who is also the deputy commander of the American-led coalition fighting the Islamic State — run “counter to the identified credible threats available to intelligence from U.S. and allies regarding Iranian-backed forces in the region,” a Central Command spokesman said in a statement on Tuesday.

The rare public dispute highlights a central problem for the Trump administration as it seeks to rally allies and global opinion against Iran.

Over the last year, Washington has said Iran is threatening United States interests in the Middle East, encouraging aggression by Shiite militias in Lebanon and Iraq, shipping missiles to Houthi rebels in Yemen and allowing its naval forces to behave belligerently in the Persian Gulf.

All are concerns that have been leveled against Iranians for years. “We are aware of their presence clearly and we monitor them along with a whole range of others because of the environment we are in,” General Ghika said.

But he said, “No, there has been no increased threat from Iranian-backed forces in Iraq or Syria.”

Intelligence and military officials in Europe as well as in the United States said that over the past year, most aggressive moves have originated not in Tehran, but in Washington — where John R. Bolton, the national security adviser, has prodded President Trump into backing Iran into a corner. One American official said the new intelligence of an increased Iranian threat was “small stuff” and did not merit the military planning being driven by Mr. Bolton. The official said the ultimate goal of the pressure campaign was to draw Iran into an armed conflict with America.

Since May 2018, the Trump administration has withdrawn from the major powers agreement that curbed Iran’s nuclear program, reimposed punishing sanctions on Tehran, demanded that al-



DOUG MILLS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

John R. Bolton, the national security adviser, has sought hard-line tactics against Iran. Officials said President Trump was aware that Mr. Bolton’s approach could lead to war.

lies choose between Iranian oil and doing business in the American market, and declared the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps a terrorist organization.

One American official said that the new intelligence of an increased Iranian threat was “small stuff.”

On Wednesday, the State Department ordered a partial evacuation of the American Embassy in Baghdad as a heightened security measure.

It is all part of the Trump administration’s drive to unite the world behind American assertions that Iran is threatening the United States and its allies. The push has proved difficult even among the allies, which remember a similar campaign against Iraq that was led in part by Mr. Bolton and was fueled by false claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

The efforts this week by Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state, to recruit European countries to back the administration’s steely posture on Iran are being received coolly. Federica Mogherini, the European Union’s foreign affairs chief, called for “maximum restraint” after meeting on Monday in Brussels with Mr. Pompeo, a ringleader of the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran.

Iraqi officials said they were skeptical of the American intelligence that Mr.

Pompeo presented last week on a surprise trip to Baghdad. Mr. Pompeo said the threat was to American “facilities” and military personnel in Iraq.

In the fall, Trump administration officials blamed Shiite militias with ties to Iran for firing rockets into the area near the United States Embassy in Baghdad and the American Consulate in Basra. There were no injuries, but Mr. Pompeo ordered the Basra consulate closed.

Privately, several European officials described Mr. Bolton and Mr. Pompeo as dragging an unsuspecting Mr. Trump up a series of escalatory steps that could put the United States on a course to war before the president realizes it.

While Mr. Trump has made no secret of his reluctance to engage in another military conflict in the Middle East, and has ordered American troops home from Syria, Mr. Pompeo and Mr. Bolton have pushed a maximalist hard-line approach on Iran. Mr. Bolton, in particular, has repeatedly called for American military strikes against Tehran.

Officials said Mr. Trump was aware that Mr. Bolton’s instinctual approach to Iran could lead to war; aides suggested that the president’s own aversion to drawn-out overseas conflicts would be the best hope of putting the brakes on any military escalation.

A spokesman for Mr. Bolton declined to comment for this article.

The Trump administration is looking at plans to potentially send as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East should

Iran attack American forces or accelerate work on nuclear weapons, The New York Times reported. On Tuesday, Mr. Trump dismissed that as “fake news.” “We have not planned for that,” he told reporters. But he immediately added, “If we did that, we’d send a hell of a lot more troops than that.”

At least some of the president’s critics accept that Iran continues to engage in what United States officials call “malign behavior,” be it in Yemen, Syria or the Palestinian territories.

But they blamed the administration for aggravating the standoff.

“This is a crisis that has entirely been manufactured by the Trump administration,” said Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, in Washington, D.C.

He pointed to Mr. Trump’s decision to pull out of the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, coupled with the administration’s failure to get any other signatories to do so. “None of the other signatories to the deal were persuaded by the case the U.S. was making,” Mr. Nasr said. “And that is because this administration’s policy on Iran, at a fundamental level, does not have credibility.”

That lack of trust has proved to be a major obstacle in convincing allies that Iranian behavior in the region warrants military action.

And while the acting defense secretary, Patrick Shanahan, has carefully cultivated a more acquiescent stance to Mr. Bolton’s demands than did his predecessor, Jim Mattis, many military officials and congressional representatives worry about the escalating tensions. Mr. Mattis had balked at Mr. Bolton’s request for military options against Iran after the American Embassy grounds were shelled in Baghdad. “Bolton did the same with President George W. Bush and Iraq,” Representative Seth Moulton, Democrat of Massachusetts and an Iraq war veteran, said in a statement last week. “As someone sent four times to that misguided war, I have seen the costs of Bolton’s disastrous foreign policy in a way he never will — firsthand, and at the loss of thousands of American lives.”



OFFICE OF THE IRANIAN PRESIDENCY

President Hassan Rouhani of Iran. Many Arabs feel there is a need to counter the expansionism of Iran, whose influence runs through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and Yemen.

One big worry is that the Trump administration has issued the most expansive type of warning to Iran, without stating specific red lines for Tehran’s actions. That has increased the chance of a military conflict starting over misinterpretations and miscalculations.

In a statement this month, Mr. Bolton outlined terms of what appeared to be conditions for military engagement, responding to what he said were “troubling and escalatory indications and warnings.” He said “any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met with unrelenting force.” And he said the administration was “fully prepared to respond to any attack” by the Iranian military or a “proxy” — one of the Middle East’s Shiite militias that are supported by Iran.

Those militias often do not operate under direct command and control from Iran, and they have varying levels of allegiance to the Iran military.

In Yemen’s civil war, the Houthis are Shiite rebels who oppose a government backed by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other Sunni nations. The Houthis’ ties to Iran are murky. But

the Trump administration labels the rebels as Iranian proxies, and Mr. Bolton’s statement left open the possibility that a Houthi attack on Saudi Arabia or the U.A.E. — both United States allies — could set off an American military assault against Iran.

The hard-line tactics against Iran could backfire in two ways, said Ali Vaez, the Iran project director at the International Crisis Group. If the sanctions crush its economy, then Iran could act with less restraint, he added. And if the sanctions do not work well, then some American officials will advocate military action, a move that Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are likely to support.

In statements, Iranian leaders have reacted with both belligerence and diplomatic restraint to a series of American actions that they see as provocative. In a tweet on Tuesday, the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, ridiculed Mr. Bolton and three anti-Iran foreign leaders in the Middle East as a “#B_Team.”



MAY 12, 2019

U.S.-backed forces to send away 3,000 foreign fighters out of Syria

DAMASCUS, May 12, 2019 (Xinhua) --

The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will discharge 3,000 foreign fighters from its ranks in three months, a war monitor reported on Sunday.

The decision comes following the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) in eastern Syria as the SDF and the U.S. coalition will be training Syrian fighters in areas under the SDF control to replace the foreign ones.

The foreign fighters, who are from Iranian and Turkish among other nationalities, will depart Syria, according to the Syrian Observatory for



Human Rights.

The Britain-based watchdog group said the decision also comes in light of the protests against the SDF in northern and northeastern Syria.

In March, the SDF announced defeating the IS in the eastern part of Syria near the Iraqi border.

International New York Times MAY 17, 2019

Iraq wary of U.S. war plans

BAGHDAD

The country wants to avoid being 'where America and Iran settle their scores'

BY ALISSA J. RUBIN

In the Trump administration's recent bellicose talk about Iran, Iraqis hear eerie echoes of the months just before the American invasion of Iraq.

Iraqi officials, wary of another war on their land, say they have warned armed groups tied to Iran to refrain from taking any action that could provoke American retaliation.

"The last two days there have been continuous meetings with all the groups to convey the Iraqi government's message that if anyone does something, it is their responsibility, not Iraq's," said Sayed al-Jayashi, a senior member of Iraq's National Security Council.

"The Iraqi government is responsible for protecting American interests in Iraq," he added. "We will become the enemy of anyone who does something against American interests."

In the past two weeks, the Trump administration has said, repeatedly and publicly, that Iran and Arab Shiite militias aligned with it were planning to strike American troops in the region, and that the threat had increased recently.

In response, the administration dispatched an aircraft carrier, long-range bombers and an antimissile battery to the Persian Gulf and updated plans for a war with Iran. On Wednesday, the State Department ordered a number of its "nonemergency" personnel in Iraq to leave the country.

There are about 30 militias in Iraq with at least 125,000 active-duty fighters

and varying loyalties. Many worked in tandem with the Iraqi military in fight-

ing the Islamic State, and all report to the prime minister's office.

The concern in Iraq is focused on the handful of groups with strong ties to Iran. Several are close to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and have members who trained in Iran.

"Unfortunately, we have groups that want to be more Iranian than Iran itself," said Salah al-Obaidi, the spokesman for the populist cleric and power broker Moktada al-Sadr. "We have concerns about the possibility that the government cannot control the pro-Iranian groups, and this will be a big problem in Iraq."

He said the government needed to take a stronger stand against those groups.

"There is still no plan on the ground about what the government will do," he said. "In the military there has to be strict rules and if anyone breaks the rules or does anything outside the plan, they are punished, and the government has not done that."

Iraq, he said, cannot "be the place where America and Iran settle their scores."

The parallels to the Bush administration's decision to go to war in 2003 based on false claims that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction do not escape anyone, but then important American allies like Canada, Britain and Japan supported the Bush administration; now the Trump administration's hostility to Iran is a far lonelier stance.

Mr. Trump has long called the Iraq war a mistake, and has said that American forces should withdraw from the Middle East and other parts of the world. But his national security adviser, John R. Bolton, has advocated military strikes against Iran and regime change there. As a State Department official in 2003, he was seen as one of the more hawkish voices on Iraq.

On the streets of Baghdad, many Iraqis say that if there is an armed conflict between Iran or its proxies and the

United States, it is more likely to take place in the gulf rather than on Iraqi soil. Unlike the Iraq of 2003, Iraq today is an American ally.

"I am not afraid of a war between Iran and the United States," said Ali Selim, 55, a barber who was drying his towels outdoors. "Then the American target was Iraq. This time it's Iran," he said, adding that the militias would not risk their own survival by provoking American retaliation because at the end of the day they are Iraqis.

Others dismissed the increased tensions as empty saber-rattling.

"It's just talk, just threats," said Salim Abu Hassan, 48, a worker who had just delivered a shipment of baby scales to a medical supply store. He said he had fought in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s, and was in Baghdad when the United States attacked 16 years ago. "Iran and America are each one trying to shout louder than the other."

It can be difficult to discern Iran's intentions since its elected leadership and government often sound reasonable, but the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Force, whose leader Qassem Soleimani is in regular touch with Iraqi figures, take a far more antagonistic stance toward the United States.

However, Mr. al-Jayashi and other senior Iraqi officials said Iran's only request to Iraq has been to prevent the United States from using its soil to launch an attack on Iranian territory.

A senior Iraqi official who asked not to be identified said that the Americans had no plans to do that. The official said that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who visited Iraq last week, told Iraqi leaders that the United States respected Iraq's sovereignty and that it would not launch attacks on Iran from Iraq.

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Mr. Pompeo's message to the Iraqis. Mr. Pompeo said that he had discussed the "importance of Iraq ensuring that it's able to adequately protect Americans in their country."

According to the official, Mr. Pompeo did not address whether the United States would launch an attack on Iraqi soil against an armed group that struck the United States, a scenario now under discussion at the Pentagon.

The prospect of escalating hostilities spilling into Iraq, which has been at war for most of the time since the American invasion, is a horror that many Iraqis wish to believe could not happen again.

"I remember the destruction and the looting and the burned and destroyed buildings," said Emad Hassan, 45. "We thought they came only to liberate Iraq, but they occupied it."



KHALID AL-MOUSILY/REUTERS

In Baghdad, many Iraqis say they don't fear a war on their country's soil; some dismiss the increased tensions between the United States and Iran as empty saber-rattling.

Le Monde VENDREDI 17 MAI 2019

La faiblesse de l'économie, talon d'Achille du pouvoir en Turquie

ANALYSE

En ordonnant d'annuler l'élection du maire d'Istanbul, remportée par l'opposition, la Haute Commission électorale a comblé le souhait du président turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, qui s'est aussitôt réjoui du triomphe de « *la volonté populaire* ». Il faut dire que le « Grand Turc » ne pouvait permettre la perte de la ville monde (16 millions d'habitants), son berceau politique et la principale source de son système de patronage.

Décrite par l'opposition comme « *un putsch contre les urnes* », réprouvée mollement par le Conseil de l'Europe, dont la Turquie est membre, la décision des juges d'Ankara a rajouté de l'incertitude au climat politique interne. Cette incertitude est comme du sel jeté sur les plaies du pays, confronté depuis le début de l'année à une récession économique – croissance en berne, inflation à 20 %, hausse du chômage, chez les jeunes surtout –, du jamais-vu depuis 2009.

Le gouvernement devrait avoir pour seule priorité de retrouver la confiance des investisseurs, dont l'économie est dépendante pour combler le déficit des comptes courants et refinancer la dette, or c'est le contraire qui se produit. Le patronat turc laïque et pro-occidental, rassemblé sous la bannière de la Tüsiad (l'équivalent du Medef français), en est conscient. Il a cru bon de le dire. Dans un communiqué publié le 7 mai, au lendemain de l'annulation, l'organisation patronale a fait part de sa « *préoccupation* » et de son attachement « *à l'agenda des réformes démocratiques* ». Ce qui lui a valu une volée de bois vert de M. Erdogan, lui enjoignant de « *se tenir à carreaux* ».

Le patronat était pourtant dans son rôle. Qui dit nouvelles élections, dit nouvelles dépenses et remise à plus tard des réformes promises. Actuellement, la baisse inexorable de la monnaie locale, la livre turque (TL), met à rude épreuve les nerfs des entrepreneurs turcs endettés en devises et qui peinent à restructurer leurs crédits. Après avoir perdu 28 % de sa valeur par rapport au dollar en 2018, elle a baissé de 14 % pendant les cinq premiers mois de 2019, ce qui fait d'elle la plus faible des monnaies des pays émergents, juste après le peso argentin.

A peine les juges de la Haute Commission électorale de Turquie avaient-ils annoncé leur décision que la livre est repartie à la baisse, jusqu'à atteindre son plus faible niveau en sept mois par rapport au dollar, soit 6,19 TL, le 7 mai. Et ce, malgré l'intervention

**UNE PARTIE
DE LA POPULATION,
URBAINE, ACTIVE,
ÉDUQUÉE, AISÉE,
A PERDU CONFIANCE
EN LA CAPACITÉ
DU PRÉSIDENT
ERDOGAN À PILOTER
L'ÉCONOMIE**

des banques d'Etat qui, entre le 6 et le 7 mai, ont dépensé un milliard de dollars sur le marché pour soutenir la monnaie défaillante.

La confiance s'étirole et les résidents turcs s'effrayent sur les devises. D'après l'Agence de supervision et de contrôle du secteur bancaire (BDDK), à la fin du mois de mars, les montants des dépôts bancaires en devises (dollars, euros) ont dépassé ceux en livres turques. Les premiers atteignent désormais 175 milliards de dollars (156 milliards d'euros) contre 165 milliards de dollars pour la livre turque (993 milliards de TL).

Il est clair qu'une partie de la population, urbaine, active, éduquée, aisée, a perdu confiance en la capacité du président Erdogan à piloter l'économie. Ce verdict s'est retrouvé dans les urnes lors des municipales du 31 mars, quand l'AKP, malgré un bon score au niveau national (44 %), a perdu Ankara, Istanbul et toutes les villes de la côte égéenne et méditerranéenne, soit 70 % du PIB du pays.

Un cap a été franchi

Apparemment, le message n'est pas passé. Au lieu de mettre de l'eau dans son thé et d'accepter la défaite de son parti à Istanbul, le président Erdogan a opté pour la manière forte. La nécessité d'« *enlever une ombre* » est, selon lui, l'une des raisons ayant incité les juges électoraux, le 6 mai, à annuler l'élection du maire d'Istanbul. L'ombre en question, une « *irrégularité* » constatée lors du vote du 31 mars dans la ville sur le Bosphore, en jette une autre sur la Haute Commission électorale dont la légitimité ressort amoindrie, tout comme la démocratie turque, ou ce qu'il en reste.

En fait d'irrégularité, les juges, à l'unisson avec l'AKP, ont constaté que certains des as-



Le président turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, s'adresse à ses partisans, à Istanbul, le 12 mai 2019. REUTERS

sesseurs présents dans les bureaux de vote à Istanbul le 31 mars n'étaient pas légitimes. Un détail qui avait échappé aux 16 253 observateurs de l'AKP présents dans les bureaux de vote ce jour-là.

Pour cette raison, l'élection a été invalidée, mais pas dans sa totalité. Le nouveau scrutin, fixé au 23 juin, portera uniquement sur le maire de la « grande municipalité ». Or, le 31 mars, il y avait quatre bulletins dans chaque enveloppe. Un bulletin pour le maire de la grande municipalité, un autre pour le maire d'arrondissement, un autre pour le conseil municipal et le dernier pour le chef d'administration du quartier (mukhtar).

La commission a statué sur un bulletin seulement, celui du maire d'Istanbul, qui a été invalidé. Les trois autres bulletins, acquis à l'AKP, n'ont pas été remis en cause. Les conseillers municipaux, les maires d'arrondissement et les mukhtars élus le 31 mars conservent leur mandat.

Selon ce raisonnement, l'élection était à un quart seulement entachée d'irrégularités. Inique, la décision des juges est un coup porté à leur crédibilité, à leur indépendance. Plus grave, pour la première fois depuis 1950, quand le système du parti unique a pris fin en Turquie, la perspective d'un changement de pouvoir par les urnes apparaît compromise.

Un cap a été franchi. Aykan Erdemir, maître de recherches à la Fondation pour la défense des démocraties (FDD) à Washington, y voit « *le passage d'un autoritarisme compétitif à un autoritarisme total, sans la nécessité de maintenir les apparences d'une démocratie par les urnes, d'un Etat de droit* ». Au risque de ramener la Turquie au rang du Venezuela, mais sans le pétrole. ■

MARIE JÉGO (ISTANBUL, CORRESPONDANTE)

Missile images set off fierce debate over Iran

WASHINGTON

White House sees peril at sea, but some officials warn against overreaction

BY JULIAN E. BARNES,
ERIC SCHMITT,
NICHOLAS FANDOS
AND EDWARD WONG

The intelligence that caused the White House to escalate its warnings about a threat from Iran came from photographs of missiles on small boats in the Persian Gulf that were put on board by Iranian paramilitary forces, three American officials said.

Overhead imagery showed fully assembled missiles, stoking fears that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps would fire them at United States naval ships. Additional intelligence picked up threats against commercial shipping and potential attacks by Iranian proxy forces on American troops in Iraq.

But just how alarmed the Trump administration should be over the new intelligence is a subject of fierce debate among the White House, the Pentagon, the C.I.A. and America's allies.

The photographs presented a different kind of threat than previously seen from Iran, said the three officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk about it publicly. Taken with the other intelligence, they could indicate that Iran is preparing to attack United States forces. That is the view of John R. Bolton, President Trump's hard-line national security adviser, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

But other officials — including Europeans, Iraqis, members of both parties in Congress and some senior officials within the Trump administration — said Iran's moves might mostly be defensive against what Tehran believes are provocative acts by Washington.

Either way, the questions about the underlying intelligence, and complaints by lawmakers that they had not been briefed on it, reflect the deep mistrust of Mr. Trump's national security team.

The State Department ordered the partial evacuation of the United States Embassy in Baghdad on Wednesday, a move that one senior American official said was an overreaction and could possibly do more to endanger diplomats than to keep them safe.



Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, left, ordered a partial evacuation of the United States Embassy in Baghdad.

Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, in a closed-door meeting of House Democrats, criticized the administration's lack of transparency on the intelligence, according to a Democratic aide. She also said that the administration must consult Congress before taking any action.

Ms. Pelosi spoke hours after the evacuation of embassy personnel was ordered by Mr. Pompeo, who as a congressman was one of the fiercest critics of the Obama administration's handling of the 2012 attacks on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya.

Intelligence officials were set to meet on Thursday with senior congressional leaders for a briefing on the new intelligence about Iran. Nine American national security and congressional officials discussed the intelligence and the closed-door talks about it on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak about it publicly.

Until recently, American government officials had said that Iran was continuing its usual support to militant groups and proxy forces in the region, but was not seeking a fight.

That changed on May 3 when what officials described as new intelligence significantly shifted the Pentagon's assessment of the immediacy of the threat. The military's Central Command asked that an aircraft carrier and bombers be sent to the Persian Gulf, rebuilding a deterrent force that some officials believed had been eroded by troop drawdowns.

On May 5, the White House sent Mr.

Bolton to announce that the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln would sail sooner than expected to the gulf. Choosing Mr. Bolton to deliver that message fueled skepticism among allies and congressional Democrats.

As military officials struggled to show that the threat from Iran was growing, intelligence officials declassified a photograph of one of the small boats, called dhows, carrying what was described as a functional Iranian missile.

The Pentagon has not released the photograph. On its own, two American officials said, the photograph was not compelling enough to convince the American public and lawmakers, nor foreign allies, of the new Iranian threat. But releasing other supporting images could compromise secret sources and methods of collecting intelligence, the two officials said.

The other photographs, which remain classified, show the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps loading missiles onto the boats in several different Iranian ports, the two officials said. It is believed that the boats are under the control of the Revolutionary Guards.

CNN first reported that Iranian missiles were being moved onto ships last week. But new details have emerged in recent days, and American officials have concluded that Iran did not intend to transfer the weapons to proxy forces.

Combined with other intelligence, the boats signaled a troubling Iranian mobilization of forces that officials said put

American ships, bases and commercial vessels at risk. They were one of at least three streams of intelligence that, together, alarmed national security officials and convinced many that a more serious threat was emerging.

The United States also recently learned of conversations between the Revolutionary Guards and Iranian proxy forces discussing attacks on American troops and diplomats in Iraq. Such conversations are nothing new, but the recent discussions were held with unusual frequency and included specifics about strikes on American targets.

American officials also collected intelligence about Iran targeting commercial shipping, prompting a warning to mariners issued last Friday. That was one reason that led American officials to believe Iran was behind the sabotage of four tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. The officials, however, still do not have conclusive forensic analysis that shows Iran was to blame.

Senator Marco Rubio, Republican of Florida, who sits on the Foreign Relations and Intelligence Committees and

who was briefed last week on the new intelligence, said on Wednesday that while he did not want a war with Iran, the United States must respond if attacked.

"I've been here eight years. This is, by far, the single most imminent potential

conflict of this significance that I have been around," Mr. Rubio said. "This is real. This is not a fake thing. It's not being made up by somebody. This president does not even want to have troops in the Middle East."

Senator Chuck Schumer of New York, the Democratic leader, said flaws in the Trump administration's approach were evidenced in an article by The New York Times that reported on Pentagon plans for sending as many as 120,000 troops to the Middle East if hostilities with Iran escalated.

"Did we learn the lessons of the last decade?" Mr. Schumer said on the Senate floor. "There is an alarming lack of clarity here, there's a lack of strategy, and there's a lack of consultation. The president ought to come up with a strategy and make it clear to Congress."

Two American officials said Iran began mobilizing its forces after provocations by Washington, including new economic sanctions on Tehran, an end to exemptions to the eight governments it had allowed to buy Iranian oil and the designation of the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist group.

Representative Seth Moulton, Democrat of Massachusetts and a Marine veteran who served in Iraq, has introduced legislation to require the Trump administration to get congressional approval before "engaging in hostilities" with Iran. In April, Senator Rand Paul, Republican of Kentucky, pressed Mr. Pompeo during a hearing for the same commitment, but the secretary of state deflected the request.

Most Republicans signaled that they supported the administration's tough line. "Iran seems to be more aggressive, and we have to push back," Senator Richard C. Shelby, Republican of Alabama and the chairman of the Appropriations Committee, said after meeting with intelligence officials. "We cannot give them a lot of space."

International New York Times MAY 17, 2019

How to stop march to war with Iran

Wendy R. Sherman

OPINION

Either the Trump administration is trying to goad Iran into war or a war could come by accident because of the administration's reckless policies, but the prospect of the current tensions in the Middle East escalating into a serious conflict is now dangerously high.

This week, four commercial tankers were reportedly sabotaged off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, near the Strait of Hormuz, a strategic shipping lane for about 40 percent of the world's oil. Saudi Arabia also reported that drones sent by Iranian-supported Houthis attacked Saudi oil facilities. Both incidents ratcheted up tensions as anonymous American officials in the press pointed to Iran as the perpetrator. Tehran has denied this.

Additionally, during a meeting with European foreign ministers in Brussels, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reportedly shared reports of escalating Iranian threats in the Middle East. On Wednesday, the State Department announced that it was pulling nonessential staff from Iraq, citing

The U.S. Congress, Europe and business leaders can stand in John Bolton's way.

unspecified Iranian threats. This came after increased American sanctions against Iran and the movement of an American aircraft carrier and B-52s to the Persian Gulf. With Iran threatening to step back further from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, better known as the Iran nuclear deal, the Trump administration leaked plans to send 120,000 troops to the Middle East if war is to come.

But war is not inevitable. President Trump campaigned on bringing troops

home, not sending tens of thousands more to the Middle East. Such a deployment, although inadequate for a full-scale war, is more than foolish. War in the Middle East, as we should have learned by now, is neither swift to end nor sure to achieve its purpose.

The best way to avoid war is to talk with Iran, which President Trump has said he wants to do. Prisoner-swap negotiations, to bring home Americans imprisoned or missing in Iran, could create an important channel of com-



The USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier, has been deployed to the Persian Gulf in response to unspecified threats from Iran.

munication, and the leadership in Tehran is open to this. But a leader-to-leader meeting can happen only if the United States rejoins the nuclear deal — and at this point that unfortunately seems unlikely.

The good news is that Congress, America's allies and others can intervene to avert a disastrous conflict.

Although bipartisanship is scarce, caution in sending American troops abroad remains a common cause. Both houses of Congress should immediately hold hearings on the leaked war plans.

If the administration won't provide Patrick M. Shanahan, the acting secretary of defense, as a witness, then Congress should agree to whoever the administration sends and include in the hearing the chairman of the Joint Chiefs or his designee. This hearing should be public, but Congress should also welcome a classified session to discuss leaked intelligence alleging plots by Iran.

Congress should also use its powers to challenge the legal authority for a war with Iran. The Senate is scheduled to mark up the fiscal 2020 National Defense Authorization Act next week. This provides an opportunity to limit the use of defense dollars for a new war and gives Congress a chance to develop a new Authorization for the Use of Military Force that would limit the administration's ability to wage war on Iran.

Those in Congress who wish to avoid a war need to remind the country that the debate over authorizing the use of force against Saddam Hussein, which was presented as a way to strengthen the president's hand for diplomacy, ended up giving George W. Bush the authority he used to invade Iraq.

There are other, quieter ways to encourage peaceful outcomes in the Middle East. Congress — along with think tanks and private donors — should support conversations between scholars and opinion leaders in Iran, the United States, Europe and the Middle East. Such dialogue, sometimes joined by government representatives, can help de-escalate the potential for conflict. The recent Op-Ed essay in this newspaper by Hossein Mousavian, an Iranian scholar and former diplomat, and Abdulaziz Sager, a Saudi researcher, is one courageous first step in such a process.

Congress should also invite the foreign and defense ministers of France, Germany and Britain — all of which are signatories to the Iran nuclear deal — to testify about why it is in everyone's interest to maintain the agreement and pursue diplomacy, not military action, in dealing with Iran. European security officials have already been contesting the

characterization of American intelligence about Iranian threats. Hearing from such officials in Congress will, at the least, help Americans understand that the Trump administration is isolated from the rest of the world.

Europe has already done heroic work to keep the nuclear deal intact, but Paris, Berlin and London have a further role to play in helping Iran step away a potential conflict with the United States. Europe must make Instex, its financial mechanism designed to provide some investment and

humanitarian assistance to Iran, real and viable. The Trump administration has threatened sanctions against Europe if Instex comes into force. With the possibility of a war that would be catastrophic for the entire world — including Europe — looming, that is a risk worth taking. American and European business leaders, members of Congress, and government and opinion leaders worldwide should publicly stand with European countries in this effort.

Finally, it is crucial that the news media in the United States and elsewhere continue its crusade for the facts about what is going on with Iran. We cannot repeat the days before the Iraq war when even many of our most reliable news outlets repeated and amplified what was, in fact, a flimsy case for war.

It's quite possible that none of these actions will halt John Bolton, President Trump's national security adviser, in his long-held ambition for regime change in Iran, by force of arms if necessary. And maybe even Mr. Trump sees promise in a "wag the dog" strategy in the run-up to the 2020 election, rallying his supporters around a "wartime" president. But a military conflict with Iran would have historic negative consequences for America's national security, economy and standing in the world. We cannot just let it happen.

Wendy R. Sherman is the former under secretary of state for political affairs, lead negotiator of the Iran nuclear deal, and the author of "Not for the Faint of Heart: Lessons in Courage, Power and Persistence."

The best way to avoid conflict is to talk with Iran, which President Trump wants to do.



19 May 2019

Erbil-Baghdad ties, unity of Kurdistan must top president's agenda: panel



Panel discussion organized by the Rudaw Research Center takes place at the Saad Abdullah Conference Hall in Erbil, May 19, 2019. Photo: Rudaw TV

By Rudaw.net - 19/5/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan — Mending ties between Erbil and Baghdad and preserving the unity of Kurdistan must top the agenda of the Region's next president, a panel organized by Rudaw Research Center said Sunday.

The panel, titled "The President of the Kurdistan Region in the next four years," took place in Erbil shortly after the Kurdistan regional parliament's presidency board announced the nomination of five candidates for the top job.

The five nominees include outgoing KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Omed

Abdulsalam, Mohammed Hamasalih, Rebwar Aziz Mustafah, and Hiwa Khidir Abdullah.

Nechirvan Barzani, nephew of former president Masoud Barzani who resigned in October 2017, is widely expected to secure the job with 90 votes in the 111-seat legislature.

Paul Landry, head of the French Cultural Institute, said the greatest challenge facing the Region's next president is "preserving" the territorial unity of the Region.

Mamand Rozha, head of Rudaw's Research Center, agreed that the primary challenge for the next president's rule is the current division of the Region, mainly →

→ caused by party control over armed forces.

"The first duty of Kurdistan Region's president in these coming four years is for the constitution to be passed through the parliament," argued Rozha, who said this would help to further unify the Region.

Dr. Mohammed Askar, a Saudi political expert, agreed the next president faces "truly difficult tasks" in addressing Iraq's unity, maintaining the unity of the Region, and establishing connections with the Kurdish populations in Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the diaspora.

The Kurdistan Region provinces of Erbil and Duhok are dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), while Sulaimani and Halabja are dominated by the Patriotic Union

of Kurdistan (PUK). Both command Peshmerga units, which champions of reform say undermines the Region's democratic institutions.

The two parties were locked in negotiations since the September 30 parliamentary election to strike a power-sharing deal. Failure to reach a compromise could have seen the Region geographically break in two.

Dr. Nadim al-Jabiri, previously head of the Islamic Virtue Party (Fadhila) of Iraq, argued that the main task for the regional president is to mend relations with Baghdad.

He warned the condition of the relationship between the center and the Region is still vague. The main issue is Baghdad's urge for centralization and in the Region's impulse for decentralization.

The "growth" of a nationalist Kurdish project towards independence both among the ruling elite and the population is one side of the problem, while an urge for authoritarianism in Baghdad is the other side of the problem, Jabiri said.

"That is the main problem in my opinion ... Reassuring messages need to be sent to Baghdad," he added.

Relations between Erbil and Baghdad hit their lowest ebb in the immediate aftermath of the Kurdistan independence referendum in September 2017. Tensions had already been running high in a spat over the Region's independent oil sales, which had led Baghdad to scrap Erbil's share of the federal budget.

Angered by the vote for independence, Baghdad imposed an embargo on the Region's international airports. Then in October 2017, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed paramilitias seized control of the territories disputed between the federal government and the Kurdistan Region, including oil-rich Kirkuk.

Relations have since thawed and improved dramatically since Adil Abdul-Mahdi became Iraqi prime minister.

The Regional president is the highest executive authority in the Region and is the commander-in-chief of armed forces. For the first time in the Region's history, the president will be elected by the parliament and not by the electorate.■



May 20, 2019

Iraq's Iran-backed militias repudiate missile attack on Baghdad's Green Zone

Kosar Nawzad / May 20-2019
www.kurdistan24.net

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24) – Iran-backed Shia militia leaders on Monday distanced themselves from a rocket attack a day earlier that was directed at the Iraqi capital's fortified Green Zone, landing near the US embassy complex.

The attack, conducted using a Katyusha rocket with no casualties reported, came amid escalating tensions between Washington and Tehran, as the former re-imposed and later compounded economic and political sanctions on Iran after it withdrew last year from the landmark nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The US recently announced further military deployments to the Persian Gulf to deter possible attacks by Iranian forces and its proxies across the Middle East. Washington also ordered on Wednesday the departure of nonessential US staff in its mission offices across Iraq and the Kurdistan Region and suspended visa services.

Concerns over potential attacks by Iran-backed entities in Iraq have piled among other diplomatic offices. On Thursday, British paper The Guardian reported, citing two intelligence sources, that famed Iranian general Qasim Soleimani, head of the Quds force of the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), had earlier met with Iraqi militia leaders and told them to "prepare for a proxy war."

Striking the heart of the Green Zone, about a kilometer away from the US embassy, the rocket was apparently fired from the eastern part of Baghdad near the capital's Technological University, where the Iraqi security forces found the launch pad, a knowledgeable source told Kurdistan 24.

A photo circulated on social media purpor-



Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, that includes government offices and foreign embassies, including the US embassy. (Photo: Reuters)

ted to be of the launch pad that was used to fire a ticket at Baghdad's Green Zone in May 19, 2019.

Although the identity of the perpetrators is yet unclear, the launch site is close to areas where various Shia militias are active and hold sway. The model of the launcher, as seen in a picture that is believed to have been used by the attackers on Sunday, is one used by Iranian forces, the American Washington Examiner claimed in a report.

AVOIDING WAR

Distancing themselves from the attack, senior leaders among the Shia militias linked with Iran voiced their opposition to it and escalations that could potentially lead to a devastating war.

"National, religious, and historical responsibility requires everyone to remove the specter of war from Iraq first of all and the whole region second," Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Badr Organization militia group and the Fatah political alliance, said in a statement.

"If war breaks out, everyone will burn."

Amiri then accused Israel of being the only country that "pushes" for war, a claim that has also been made by Iranian leaders, among them Foreign Minister Javad Zarif.

Zarif has said US President Donald Trump was being pushed into war by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and US National Security Adviser John Bolton.

Qais al-Khazali, head of the Asaib Ahl al-Haq militia – another influential group – echoed Amiri's statement: "We warn against [actions] intended to find pretexts of war and damage Iraq's political, economic, and security situation."

THE END OF IRAQ

A long-time critic of foreign intervention in Iraq's internal affairs and the leader of a militia group that once fought US troops in Iraq following the fall of the Saddam Hussein-led regime in 2003, firebrand Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr also stated his opposition to actions that could increase tensions and possibly lead to war between arch-foes Iran and the US.

"I am not for fueling war between Iran and America," Sadr said in a Twitter statement.

Sadr is an influential Iraqi political and religious figure who headed the Sairoon Alliance in the last Iraqi parliamentary elections which came in first place, winning about one-sixth of the seats in the legislature.

"We need a serious stand by the senior [leaders] of the nation to keep Iraq away from the start of a fierce war," he added. If the country "does not have a united stand," then a war "would be the end of Iraq."◆

Iraqi Kurdistan edges towards new government

Manuel Langendorf

London

More than seven months after elections in Iraqi Kurdistan, the two largest parties announced they reached an understanding to break the political impasse in forming the next Kurdistan Regional Government.

Nechirvan Barzani, deputy leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's (PUK) acting leader, Kosrat Rasul, signed an agreement May 5.

Rasul called the agreement historic and a KDP spokesman voiced hope that the cabinet formation process could begin within days. The Gorran (Change) Movement will join the government, having signed an agreement with the KDP in February.

The KDP, the party of Masoud Barzani, won 45 of 111 seats in the elections September 30, 2018. The PUK and Gorran picked up 21 and 12 seats, respectively.

"This new agreement is a major development," said Mohammed Shareef, a lecturer at the University of Sulaymaniyah.

Sulaymaniyah Governor Haval Abubakir, a member of Gorran, stressed the need to establish a "transparent government... on the basis of accountability" after what he described as catastrophic developments that had affected the Kurdistan region over the last three years.

Abubakir said the agreement "has become an obligation" not to let only one party participate in establishing the government "because we are at a risky stage of governance in Kurdistan."

On May 8, the regional parliament passed a bill to reactivate the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) presidency, which had been left vacant since Masoud Barzani stepped down in November after a failed independence referendum in 2017. The bill stipulates that the president would, for the first time, be elected by parliament, a key demand by Gorran.

Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG prime minister, is expected to win the presidency after the tripartite agreement. "Whether or not there is another candidate, next week Nechirvan Barzani will be elected president," Hevidar Ahmed, a member of the KDP parliamentary bloc, said May 13.

The KDP has nominated Masrouf Barzani, the intelligence chief and son of Masoud Barzani, to succeed his cousin as prime minister of the semi-autonomous region.

The presidency bill, which also created a second vice-presidential post, faced criticism by opposition parties, which said the amendments granted too much power to the president without sufficient parliamentary oversight. Objections also came from within Gorran. In a statement, party members said the leadership had bowed "to sultanism, absolutism and the absolute power of the presidency."

Nechirvan Barzani, the KRG prime minister, is expected to win the presidency after the tripartite agreement.

The new government, observers said, will face many challenges. Many of which hark back to the establishment of the first Iraqi Kurdish government in the early 1990s, said Kamal Chomani, a Kurdish political analyst and non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, including unification of the security forces.

"The forces are deeply politicised to an extent that some forces are loyal not only to the political parties but to political figures," he said.

Despite international support to create a national force, Chomani said he was pessimistic, arguing that the KDP's and PUK's existence was "mainly connected to holding a grip over their militias so as to deter each other and crack down on any dissent."

Shareef said he saw maintaining and improving relations with Baghdad as "the main challenge for the KRG," stating that relations have been "hugely strained" since 2014. Key issues in that regard, he said,



Challenges ahead. Nechirvan Barzani, deputy leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, casts his vote at a polling station in Erbil, last September. (Reuters)

are the Kurdistan region's share of the federal budget, Article 140 (which refers to disputed territories such as Kirkuk) and the salaries of civil servants.

The future of Iraq's disputed territories remains a sticking point in relations with Baghdad. Some media reports said the PUK and KDP had agreed to appoint a joint candidate for the position of governor in Kirkuk. Peshmerga units took over large parts of the province when Islamic State militants stormed across northern Iraq. However, after the 2017 independence referendum caused heightened tensions with Baghdad, security forces tied to the federal government retook Kirkuk.

Apart from the disputed territories, the government will also have to deal with a financial crisis and widespread youth unemployment in the region, said Chomani. He estimated that unemployment among young people was 40-50%. This poses a risk for the new government as youth unemployment "may be exploited by extremist groups" and could trigger demonstrations.

Abubakir said it was "essential" for the government to overcome the economic crisis and aim to create more job and investment opportunities as well as provide services to the people.

Shareef said the fact that the three main parties went through individual crises before signing the agreement was having a positive effect, allowing elites to develop a better understanding of the difficulties of governance and the dissatisfaction of constituents.

Chomani warned that Masrouf Barzani, expected to become prime minister, has his roots in the security apparatus and has been known for his crackdown on dissent. The Democracy and Human Rights Development Centre, a local human rights organisation, said in a report that human rights violations had increased over the last year.

Observers said it is unlikely that a new cabinet will be announced before the end of Ramadan.

Manuel Langendorf is a writer focusing on the MENA region.

If Syria Safe-Zone Talks Fail: How the SDF Might Respond to Turkish Intervention

The Kurdish-led force cannot hold the northeast on its own, and withdrawing coalition support would bolster Assad and Moscow's interests.

John Holland-McCowan - May 17, 2019
<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>

As the United States, Turkey, and the Syrian Democratic Forces accelerated their discussions over a potential safe zone in northeast Syria in recent weeks, a surprise letter on May 6 added a new dimension to the talks. Following his first meeting with lawyers in eight years, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan issued a memo calling for "democratic negotiations" between the Kurdish-led SDF and Ankara in order to foster a "constitutionally enshrined local democracy within the framework of a united Syria."

Sources close to the situation believe the timing of his letter was intended to facilitate a deal over the northeast Syria border zone, where the SDF—led by the U.S.-backed PKK offshoot the People's Defense Units (YPG)—are in control. For months, Turkey and Washington have been negotiating a plan to jointly patrol a safe zone that would extend approximately twenty miles into Syria, with the SDF withdrawing from all buffer areas (the zone's potential length and endpoints are still unclear). SDF representatives report that U.S. officials have been pressuring them to allow a limited number of Turkish forces in this proposed zone; Ocalan's statement may encourage the group to be more flexible on these matters.

Yet while U.S. policymakers express confidence that such a deal can be reached and implemented, recent history should give optimists pause. And if the talks fail, Turkish forces may decide to move into northeast Syria on their own accord. How might the SDF respond to unilateral establishment of a buffer zone?

NONSTARTERS AND BAD PRECEDENTS

SDF officials have long described the prospect of a Turkish military deployment in their northeastern stronghold as a nonstarter. They recognize that Ankara regards the YPG as a direct outgrowth of the PKK, which has waged an insurgency in Turkey since 1984 and been designated a terrorist group by Turkish, U.S., and EU authorities. Accordingly, the YPG and its political wing worry that any Turkish inroads in the northeast would existentially threaten the entire movement.

Recent precedent does not bode well for the viability of Turkish involvement either. After long negotiations, Washington and Ankara agreed on a roadmap last June to clear the SDF from Manbij, which lies just west of the Euphrates River section where the YPG's core territory begins. The deal has yet to be fully realized, however. The joint U.S.-Turkish

patrols called for in the agreement took months to be initiated, SDF fighters remain in the city, and sporadic clashes between Turkish-backed militias and SDF units still occur. The situation illustrates that even if a deal over the northeast is reached on paper, implementation could pose significant challenges.

In a March 31 speech, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that "our target is now eliminating the terror structures in Manbij and east of the Euphrates." He has repeatedly warned that he will establish a unilateral buffer zone in those areas if U.S. talks fail. His words should not be taken lightly given that Turkey has intervened in north Syria twice in the past three years: Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016 and Operation Olive Branch in January 2018. Although Erdogan claimed that the goal of those operations was to counter the Islamic State, the former campaign focused on the SDF as much as IS, while the latter was entirely geared toward fighting the YPG and SDF.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF TURKEY INTERVENES?

Without the aid of the U.S.-led coalition, the SDF cannot be expected to successfully defend their territory against Turkey. Given the remarkable success that the YPG and, later, the SDF experienced in pushing back IS, outside observers may overestimate how self-reliant they can be against a conventional military foe.

For example, absent coalition airpower, they would not have been able to defend Kobane or seize Raqqa, Manbij, and much of Deir al-Zour governorate. It was their partnership with Western special forces, intelligence assets, and close air support that made their ground forces so potent. Without such backing, they most likely could not withstand an offensive by proxy forces with Turkish support, let alone the Turkish army itself. This is especially true on the unfavorably flat terrain of northeast Syria. Even when the YPG attempted to defend their mountainous western enclave in Afrin—terrain far more suitable to irregular warfare—Turkish-backed forces were able to capture it within a matter of months.

In light of these military realities, the SDF have no incentive to give Turkey extra pretext for further interventions, or to give Washington cause for withdrawing support. Thus, any notion that the PKK might reinvigorate its armed campaign in Turkey to deter aggression against its Syrian offshoot was likely off the mark even before Ocalan's recent letter. From the beginning of the Syria war, the YPG and SDF have made it a priority to distinguish their campaign from the PKK's fight in Turkey, and



Kurdish officials are well aware that another outburst of PKK violence could spark Turkish action on both sides of the border.

If coalition support does in fact weaken, the SDF will most likely try to forge a deal with Bashar al-Assad and Russia in order to guard the northeast. Ever since they cemented their hold over the region, the YPG/SDF have generally cooperated with the Assad regime. For instance, the regime has maintained pockets of control in YPG-held Qamishli and Hasaka since 2011 with little friction besides occasional skirmishes.

Yet the SDF know all too well what fickle allies Damascus and Moscow can be, as illustrated during the Turkish seizure of Afrin. It was Russia's withdrawal of troops from that pocket and the regime's ceding of airspace to Turkey that paved the way for that offensive. A month after the operation began, the YPG desperately called on Assad to help them, but not even the limited presence of regime-affiliated militias could halt Turkish-backed forces.

In truth, Damascus has no desire to strengthen the Kurds despite coming to their aid on occasion. A now-emboldened Assad wants to bring more of Syria to heel, and the YPG's proclaimed aspirations for a pluralistic, semiautonomous entity in the northeast are simply out of tune with the regime's mentality.

Perhaps the gravest threat the SDF would face if Turkey unilaterally intervenes is maintaining internal cohesion. Survey data suggests that the group's Arab components would defect if given the opportunity, whether the opposing forces in question are Erdogan's or Assad's. Despite the SDF's ethnically mixed nature, most Sunni Arabs in northeast Syria have acquiesced to the Kurdish-dominated local administration primarily because it has secured American support and a monopoly of force. If Turkish-backed forces challenge this monopoly amid wavering coalition support, wide-scale Arab defections could render the SDF a primarily Kurdish outfit. □→

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In that scenario, the overwhelmingly Kurdish remnants of the SDF would likely be forced to withdraw from mixed Arab-Kurdish or predominantly Arab areas such as Manbij, Tal Abyad, Raqqa, and Deir al-Zour, retreating to their isolated Kurdish enclaves in order to preserve what limited autonomy and power they have left. In doing so, they would simultaneously forfeit their best bargaining chips with

the Assad regime while severely curtailing their utility to the United States and other coalition allies, who want to maintain a partner force in predominantly Arab areas that seem most vulnerable to an IS resurgence.

In short, a Turkish incursion could unravel the SDF at the seams. If current negotiations fail, U.S. policymakers must recognize that allowing Ankara to unilaterally establish a buffer zone may essentially eliminate the coalition's best

ally in Syria. To secure their protection, the SDF would be forced to seek a deal with the Assad regime and Russia, critically weakening U.S. influence in the region. ♦

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FINANCIAL TIMES

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Syria is braced for new spasms of violence

The Idlib rebel stronghold faces an onslaught from Assad's forces, aided by Russia and Turkey

David Gardner
MAY 21, 2019
<https://www.ft.com>



While concern is growing internationally at the dangerous game of brinkmanship playing out in the Gulf between the US and Iran, Syria, where both countries supposedly confront each other, is catching fire again.

For a month now, Russia has used air strikes to blast a path through for Bashar al-Assad's regime into the south of Idlib province, the last rebel stronghold, in north-west Syria. Turkey and its local proxy forces this month started moving eastwards from the two north-western enclaves Ankara holds in Syria, continuing its campaign against Syrian Kurdish militia backed by the US air force in the successful fight against Isis — but which Washington now looks poised to abandon.

President Donald Trump has said he will withdraw US forces from Syria, while his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, has pledged to “expel every last Iranian boot” from the country.

It is not just the Kurds who are confused.

Syria, which has already suffered 500,000 deaths and the uprooting of half its population in eight years of pitiless fratricidal war, is bracing itself for new spasms of violence that could be every bit as dreadful. To begin with Idlib.

Idlib was one of the first cities to rise up against Assad rule in 2011. Taken by the regime in 2012, it was



Turkish soldiers in the Kurdish-majority city of Afrin in north-western Syria after seizing control from Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in March last year © AFP

captured in 2015 by an alliance of Islamists. That was one of the events that convinced Russia that unless it committed its air force to supporting Iranian-backed militias and ground forces the Assad regime would fall.

Moscow and Tehran together turned the tide. Last year, Idlib province became one of four “de-escalation zones” devised by Russia in co-ordination with Iran — and also with a Turkey that switched its priorities in Syria from trying to topple the Assads to stopping a new regional assertion of Kurdish rights, fearing it would link up with the reignited insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK) in south-east Turkey.

Rebel resistance in these four zones was still strong and the minority Assad regime, short of manpower, needed a breathing space. De-escalation became a diplomatic figleaf to cover regime offensives alongside pro-Iran militias such as

Hizbollah, the Lebanese paramilitaries, on the ground and Russia's warplanes in the sky.

These offensives drove surviving rebel fighters and civilian refugees, from Deraa in the south, where the rebellion began, to the eastern Ghouta enclave threatening Damascus, into Idlib. They were corralled into what Sergei Lavrov, Russia's foreign minister, called “the last hotbed of terrorists in Syria”.

It was only a matter of time before an onslaught against Idlib, deferred in September, was rescheduled. Moscow and Damascus say Ankara did not hold up its end of the deal. Turkey was supposed to rein in Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the rebranded Nusra front, which claims to have separated from al-Qaeda.

HTS has at least 30,000 fighters in Idlib. But there are 3m civilians in Idlib province, half of them already displaced at least once. The UN estimates 180,000 of them have had to run again. Russian and Syrian air strikes, in a familiar pattern, are already targeting hospitals and schools. Mark Lowcock, the UN

humanitarian affairs co-ordinator, told the UN Security Council last week: “When I briefed you here on September 18, I said a full-scale military onslaught could result in the worst humanitarian tragedy of the 21st century. Despite our warnings, our worst fears are coming true”.

Turkey, not noted for rhetorical restraint under Recep Tayyip Erdogan, its mercurial and pugnacious president, has been supine in the face of Idlib's unfolding tragedy.

Mr Erdogan and much of Turkey, a Nato ally, is enraged that the US and its allies came to rely on Kurdish fighters in their campaign against Isis. The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) — which with US air cover controls north-east Syria, about a quarter of the country below Turkey's border — is organically linked to the PKK fighting inside its frontier. To Ankara, that is existential.

In late 2016, Turkey made a decision that helped change the course of the Syrian war. It withdrew its Syrian Sunni rebel proxies from the defence of Aleppo to launch its first incursion against Syrian Kurds in north-west Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield). The deal it made with Russia over Idlib last year looked to be a quid pro quo for Moscow's assent to Operation Olive Branch — the Turkish invasion of Afrin, the Kurdish canton in north-west Syria.

President Erdogan, in other words, needed the imprimatur of Russia's President Vladimir Putin for his new, anti-Kurd policy inside Syria. In light of this, it looks as if Turkey is washing its hands of Idlib and its Sunni rebels in exchange for a free hand against the Kurds. As Fabrice Balanche, a French scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy puts it: “The Sunni rebels and the Kurds are the main currency of exchange between Turkey and Russia”.

Mr Trump's US is a mere onlooker. Europe, which could face a new “migrant” crisis if these two conflicts start pushing new waves of refugees north, is nowhere to be seen. Syria keeps burning. ♦

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It was only a matter of time before an onslaught against Idlib, deferred in September, was rescheduled

Erdogan's efforts to shore up lira may backfire

ISTANBUL

Nation spends billions to prop up its currency, but it's still losing value

BY CARLOTTA GALL
AND JACK EWING

Even before the Turkish authorities took the extraordinary step of undoing an opposition victory and calling a new election for mayor of Istanbul, the government had spent billions to prop up the country's flagging currency over the last year and bolster its candidates.

But since May 6, as the political turmoil rattles investors, it is spending sometimes a billion dollars a day, even on the sly, to support the currency, the lira, as well as the waning aura of invincibility around President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Mr. Erdogan, 18 years in power, was re-elected last year for a new five-year term to a presidency with vastly expanded powers. He has already trimmed civil liberties, purged and jailed political opponents after a failed 2016 coup, and brought a free press to heel.

Increasingly, the president has also taken over management — or mismanagement, critics say — of the economy to sustain the nearly unbroken growth that has brought him a loyal following.

For many Turks and foreign investors, the spending to prop up the lira is the latest example of Mr. Erdogan placing his political and personal fortunes ahead of those of his country, this time to regain control of Istanbul, the most important base of his power and prestige.

Even if the government can stave off an economic crisis before the new election, scheduled for June 23, many fear that the profligate spending will increase the likelihood of a collapse that could ripple well beyond Turkey. European banks own billions in Turkish debt.

Last year, the lira lost 30 percent of its value, and it is down 14 percent so far this year.

The loss of the March 31 mayoral election in Istanbul was the most significant sign that support for Mr. Erdogan's Justice and Development Party, or A.K.P., has become vulnerable as the economy has weakened.

Even before the loss, Mr. Erdogan had used the government budget, the central bank and government-controlled banks to defend the currency, forestall a



A poster with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at right, hanging in a bazaar in Istanbul. Mr. Erdogan's spending on the lira comes ahead of a mayoral election in Istanbul.

credit crunch, and even to pay for stands selling subsidized vegetables in the hopes of keeping voters on his side.

But the economic duct tape that the government has used to maintain the support of working-class voters is beginning to come undone, economists say. It looks increasingly unlikely to hold until June 23.

The decision to nullify the Istanbul election — made by a body beholden to Mr. Erdogan, which found that some election officials had been appointed illegally — may ultimately backfire on the president by adding to the economic distress that caused him to lose Istanbul in the first place, analysts say.

"They voted because the economy sucks," said Atilla Yesilada, an Istanbul-based consultant at Global Source Partners, referring to Turks who switched to the opposition. "And now it sucks even more."

Among the small businesses that underpin the economy, desperation is already palpable.

Yasin Sahinoglu, who owns two shoe stores in Istanbul's affluent Etiler and Nisantasi neighborhoods, said that sales had shrunk by half in the days after the election results were thrown out.

That was on top of a 60 percent decline in the previous year, he added. "Everyone is concerned about the future, so they prefer to keep the money in their pockets," Mr. Sahinoglu said.

Durmus Yilmaz, the former governor of Turkey's central bank and co-founder of the opposition IYI Party, said it had been at least 20 years since officials had made a similar attempt to prop up the lira — and it had backfired then.

"Turkey has mortgaged its future," said Mr. Yilmaz, who spent 32 years at the central bank.

The central bank's net reserves have

been declining since September as the government has sought to bolster the lira. Foreign currency reserves were \$74 billion at the end of March, a decline of 5 percent from February, according to central bank figures.

"It seems questionable whether Turkey's war chest of foreign reserves is strong enough to withstand anything that even vaguely resembles a currency attack," Bart Hordijk, a market analyst at Monex Europe, a currency trading firm, said in a note to clients this month.

Since March, analysts say they have found discrepancies in the central bank's figures on the state of the national reserves, according to Selva Demiralp, an economics professor at Koc University in Istanbul.

Some analysts suspect that the government is discreetly transferring funds to public banks, which are then selling dollars to prop up the lira.

In response to written questions last week, the central bank showed no signs of backing down from its spending to support the currency.

"The Central Bank will go on using all the means in its hands for the aim of price stability," the statement said.

It also promised that inflation would fall to 5.4 percent at the end of 2021 from almost 20 percent now.

Yet some signs of economic collapse are already manifest, including rising unemployment, a surge in bad loans and corporate bankruptcies. Perhaps most important is the collapsing confidence of foreign investors, evident in the plunge in the lira.

The China-like growth rates that Mr. Erdogan has delivered until recently would not have been possible without the money from investors attracted by Turkey's high interest rates.

Turkey may enlist its No. 1 enemy to broker a peace with Kurdish separatists

By Umar Farooq / May 20, 2019 | <https://www.latimes.com>

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey / The Turkish government's enemy No. 1 has spent the last two decades in physical isolation on a prison island off the coast of Istanbul. But Abdullah Ocalan's influence extends to Kurds across the Middle East.

Statements by the 71-year-old — carried out from Imrali island by sporadic visitors — have been published in best-selling books, and inspired both war and peace. Now, there are signs Ankara may be turning to him to broker a new peace with Kurdish separatists, not just in Turkey, but also in neighboring Syria.

On Wednesday, Turkish officials said they had lifted restrictions on visits to Ocalan. The announcement followed a visit to Ocalan by his lawyers, the first such meeting Turkish authorities have allowed in eight years, and came amid the largest mass hunger strike in Turkey's history. More than 3,000 people have participated for months, and eight have committed suicide after calling for Ankara to allow Ocalan regular visits.

For the recent visit, Ocalan's lawyers underwent three separate body searches before taking a 2 1/2-hour boat ride to Imrali to meet Ocalan, who was dressed in a dark blue jacket, velvet pants and linen shirt. The meeting, said Rezan Sarica, one of two lawyers who attended the May 2 session, was akin to what detainees at Guantanamo Bay have gone through — their lawyers sent to an isolate island lockup and not allowed to bring any paper or documents with them, or record what was discussed.

"He did not waste time, he had already thought about what to say and had a statement to give us," Sarica said. The statement, signed by Ocalan and the three other Kurdish militant leaders held on the island, called on hunger strikers not to risk their lives. They also stood by a 2013 statement calling for a transition to political struggle, an announcement that led to a two-year cease-fire at the time. "The problems in Turkey and even the region, primarily the war, cannot be solved through physical violence, but with reason, and cultural and political force," the statement read.

Ocalan also extended the call to the Syrian Democratic Forces, the U.S.-backed Kurdish militia in northern Syria that sees him as the group's ideological leader. Ankara has threatened war against the forces, even if it meant fighting U.S. troops, and Ocalan instead advised the group to refrain from a "culture of conflict" and keep "Turkey's sensibilities in mind."

That advice comes amid statements from SDF leaders that they are engaged in a dialogue with Ankara brokered by Washington. SDF leaders have said they have met over the last few weeks with Turkish intelligence officials, who in turn have been meeting with Ocalan.



A youth holds a flag with the image of Abdullah Ocalan, the jailed leader of the rebel Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, in Istanbul, Turkey, in March 2018. (Lefteris Pitarakis / Associated Press)

Such steps are not surprising given Ocalan's influence in northern Syria, said Galip Dalay, a visiting scholar at Oxford University.

"Ocalan is still the unrivaled, undisputed leader of the Kurdish movement. There is no other figure that can come close to his stature," Dalay said. "That doesn't mean whatever decision he makes, the organizations follow it without question, but those organizations cannot take a public stance against his decision."

The fact that Ankara was now allowing such statements to be released by Ocalan though, appears to be a sign that Turkey is open to fresh dialogue. "No decision has been made yet," said Dalay, "but [Turkey and Ocalan] are saying, 'Let's test the waters, see what is out there, and if this proves to be positive, we can build on it.'"

Ocalan has been behind bars since 1999, when Turkish intelligence agents took him into custody in Kenya and brought him to Imrali. There, he was tried and sentenced to death on charges of treason and sedition for his role as the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, which has waged a four-decade insurgency in which more than 40,000 people have died. Turkey and its allies, including the U.S., consider the PKK a terrorist group.

In 2002, Turkey commuted Ocalan's sentence to life in prison with no possibility of parole. But Turkey has imposed a no-fly zone over Imrali since then, and no vessels have been allowed to approach within five miles. Ocalan was the sole prisoner on Imrali until 2009, when Ankara began rotating a handful of other top PKK prisoners through, partly in hopes they could persuade the Kurdish leader to call for a cease-fire to the insurgency.

Legally, Ocalan has a right to see his lawyers once a week, but his counsels' requests — more than 800 of them — have been denied in often bizarre ways, said Sarica. Bad weather or mechanical problems with the boat that would bring them to the island were cited by authorities between 2011 to 2016, he said. Then a state of emergency was imposed after a failed coup attempt.

This year, Sarica was told there was a new disciplinary board on the island, and Ocalan was

being punished for unspecified violations of prison rules.

So the May 2 meeting, Sarica said, came out of the blue.

"From a legal perspective, nothing had changed, so it must have been a political decision," he said.

For many who support Ocalan, the ball is now in Ankara's court.

"When you isolate [Ocalan], you are isolating the problem itself, the political aspect of the problem, and the person that you should be speaking to regarding this problem," said Tayip Temel, a lawmaker from the People's Democratic Party, or HDP, a pro-Kurdish opposition party whose leaders helped broker the 2013 cease-fire between the PKK and Ankara.

That agreement, announced at Nowruz celebrations in the city of Diyarbakir to a crowd of hundreds of thousands, was borne out of months of shuttle diplomacy by HDP leaders, and secret meetings between Turkish intelligence officials and PKK leaders in Europe.

The cease-fire, however, collapsed in 2015, in part because of ongoing warfare in neighboring Syria, where a new Kurdish militant group, also inspired by Ocalan, began seizing territory from Islamic State militants. Turkey, which says the Kurdish groups in Syria are mere extensions of the PKK, was alarmed by their support from the U.S. and their sudden rise to power across its border.

Inspired by the events across the border, Kurdish militants in Turkey renewed an armed struggle. In Diyarbakir, young Kurds barricaded themselves in the heart of the city, sparking a battle with the Turkish military that lasted for months. At least 400 people were killed, and much of the historic city center was left in ruins. Similar battles took place across Turkey's Kurdish-majority southeast, and Kurdish militants carried out bombings in cities as far west as Istanbul.

At least 4,356 people have died in the conflict since 2015, according to a tally by the International Crisis Group. The renewed conflict also has had political repercussions for Turkey. At least 7,000 members of the HDP, the

⇒ third-largest political party in the country, have been sent to prison, including its top leadership and dozens of lawmakers. The group's calls for a political dialogue with the PKK have been branded by authorities as support for terrorism.

Ankara's conflict with the PKK has spilled over into Syria and Iraq. Turkey invaded and took control of parts of northwestern Syria in 2016 and has threatened to push east all the way to the Iraqi border, even if it means fighting U.S. troops deployed alongside the SDF there. In northern Iraq, where the PKK is based, Turkey has also stationed hundreds of troops and has carried out repeated airstrikes.

Ocalan spends 23 hours a day in solitary confinement, but has a television in his cell and can watch a handful of Turkish news channels and read selected newspapers.

As a result, he most surely knows that Temel and two other HDP lawmakers have been on a hunger strike since March 8. Holed up in the Diyarbakir HDP office, they are abstaining from food, subsisting on tea, sugar and salt water, and a handful of essential vitamins. Temel, who has lost nearly 25 pounds, says Ankara must allow regular visits for Ocalan and would be responsible for the deaths of any of the strikers.

In a nearby home in the winding narrow streets of Diyarbakir, Naime Celik's mother brings her daughter a glass of water and listens in silence as she explains why she has been on a hunger strike since March 1. Celik, 21, who says she has lost more than 40 pounds during the protest, was detained in 2016 by police and charged with being a PKK member, but her trial has yet to begin. In April a judge ordered that she be released pending trial.

"Ocalan initiated the 2013 peace process, which I think were the best days in this country," Celik said, "but some powers now want to destroy that process and put him in isolation again."

Celik's family, like many others in Diyarbakir, was displaced in the 1990s, when the Turkish military used a scorched earth campaign to uproot support for the PKK in the southeast, razing about 4,000 villages. She grew up hearing about that conflict, and when Diyarbakir saw urban fighting between Kurdish militants and Turkish soldiers in 2015, she says, her instincts pushed her to join the fighters — but she didn't because she had read Ocalan's writings.

"Ocalan is not the killer he is made out to be in the media in Turkey," she said. "He needs to have a direct conversation with the public, but

unfortunately for the last eight years he has been in isolation in prison. Kurdish youth watch his statements closely. If Ocalan said to the youth in Turkey today to destroy the country, to rise up, they would do it for him. But instead Ocalan says to go and educate ourselves, to learn to express ourselves better, and peace will come without conflict."

Not everyone in Turkey is convinced allowing Ocalan to speak would prove a wise idea.

Hilal Kaplan, a columnist with the Daily Sabah newspaper, said Ocalan has lost influence with Kurdish militants over the years, evidenced by the fact that the PKK broke the 2013 ceasefire ordered by him. "I don't think the state, at least people in the government, think that Ocalan has power over the people who are running the PKK at the moment," said Kaplan.

Ibrahim Karatas, a columnist with Yeni Akit newspaper, questions whether Ocalan really wants peace at all. Giving him a platform to speak publicly, Karatas said, would just be a chance for Ocalan to reassert his influence. "No one in Turkey is ready right now for a peace process. They are hoping the government learned its lessons from the last time they tried peace, and if they renew a peace process again, nothing good is going to come from it."♦

Farooq is a special correspondent.



VOICE OF AMERICA

MAY 22, 2019

US Tells Syrian Kurds Only Future Is Part of Peaceful Syrian State

Jeff Seldin / May 22, 2019
//www.voanews.com

The United States is reminding its Syrian Kurdish allies not to get overly ambitious while at the same time trying to allay concerns Washington will abandon them to Turkey or a possibly resurgent Islamic State terror group.

Kurdish fighters, under the umbrella of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, played a key role in the collapse of the IS caliphate in Syria and continue to help administer large swaths of territory liberated from the terror group.

But Ambassador James Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and the special envoy to the global coalition to defeat IS, said Wednesday that there would not be an independent Kurdish state in Syria.

"We don't have a political future that we offer for them," Jeffrey told members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee when questioned about what comes next.

"The political future we offer for them is the political future we offer for everybody in Syria ... a democratic, peaceful government," Jeffrey added.

AUTONOMOUS AREA

Following Syria's descent into civil war in 2011, Syrian Kurds quickly carved out an autonomous area covering much of the country's northeast, initially sparking hopes among some that it could serve as a basis for an independent state.

But even talks of such ambitions have upset Turkey, also a key U.S. ally, which views the main Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as a terrorist organization with links to Kurdish terrorists in

Turkey.

More than once, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to strike the group to protect Turkish interests.

"Turkey has a very legitimate concern," Jeffrey told lawmakers, though he assured them U.S. President Donald Trump remained committed to honoring both alliances.

"We are concerned about the relationship between Turkey and our SDF partners in the northeast, which is why we're this discussion or negotiation with the Turks on a safe zone," he added.

The U.S., Turkey and Kurdish-led authorities have been discussing the possibility of setting up a safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border for months.

Jeffrey said Turkish officials have requested a safe zone extending for 30 kilometers, though he called that unlikely.

"We're going back and forth with them on how deep the safe zone will be," he said. "The idea would be that the YPG forces would withdraw and leave local forces and Turkey and the United States to figure out what we would do in the safe zone."

DANGER FOR KURDS

Some lawmakers expressed concerns that Trump's plans to pull all or most of U.S. ground forces from Syria would put Washington's Kurdish allies at risk.

"One of the reasons that I think it's a terrible mistake is because we have had the Kurds fighting side by side with us as our loyal and faithful allies and friends," said House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel, D-N.Y. "They've absorbed lots of casualties, prevented



FILE - James Jeffrey speaks during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington, Oct. 11, 2017. Jeffrey is now the U.S. special representative for Syria engagement.

Americans from being killed."

U.S. officials have long said the primary goal in Syria is to deal IS a lasting defeat, but Washington has also been pushing for all Iranian forces to leave the country, as well as for a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war.

In recent days, the U.S. has also raised concerns about the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons.

The U.S. State Department said Tuesday that it was investigating an alleged attack using chlorine gas on May 19 near the northwestern city of Idlib.

"So far we cannot confirm it, but we are watching it," Jeffrey said Wednesday.

The U.S., Britain and France launched airstrikes against Syrian government targets last April, citing "incontrovertible" evidence the Assad government had used chemical weapons against its own citizens. ●

PJAK chief: 'We won't sit idly by' if US goes to war with Iran

By Rudaw.net / 22 MAY 2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) fighters will not "sit idly by" if the US goes to war with Iran, and could form a democratic front against the regime in Tehran, militia chief Zilan Vejin said in comments published Wednesday.

Established in 2004, PJAK is one of several armed Kurdish militias active along the Kurdistan Region border with Iran. It is affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a leftwing guerrilla movement which fights for great political and cultural rights for Kurds.

PJAK's fighters regularly attack Iranian border guards and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC) personnel. Iranian forces often respond with cross-border rockets.

"We will not sit idly by if war breaks out between Iran and the US," Vejin told Rojnews, a PKK affiliated outlet. "We also have our own agenda and policy."



Zilan Vejin, co-chair of Iran's Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), addresses the party's fifth congress, October 16, 2016. Photo: PJAK

If a war does break out, "we as a political party can form a democratic front," she added.

Vejin said any foreign intervention in Iran must consider the rights of its ethnic minorities, including the Kurds, who occupy Iran's mountainous northwestern provinces.

"The agenda should take into account the characteristics of Iranian

society and provide for the rights of all people from all the different national and ethnic backgrounds," she said.

The PJAK co-chair said the US is squaring up to Iran in order to further its own interests – not to redress Iran's human rights record or resolve the Kurdish question.

"We think war and disagree-

ments between them are not in the interests of the Iranian nations," she said.

"Their problems are not over a solution to the question of the Kurdish nation, oppressed nations, human, women, or youth rights."

"We think Iran and the US are fighting for their own interests."

Washington has been turning up the heat on Tehran since May 2018 when it withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and reimposed crippling sanctions targeting Iran's economy and oil sector.

It then designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization and deployed an aircraft carrier group and B-52 bombers to the Persian Gulf.

Far from reining in its abuses, US moves against Iran have only made the regime more repressive, Vejin said.

"Army pressures on the society increased after [the IRGC] was put on the terror list," she said.

"Iran will not give up its pressure on society. Poverty and unemployment levels in Iran and east Kurdistan are higher than ever."

"Through militarizing and terrifying the society, the Iranian regime is showing it is not abandoning its flawed policies," she added. ■

LA CROIX 23 mai 2019

En Syrie, soupçon d'attaque au chlore et recrudescence d'embuscades djihadistes

Les États-Unis ont fait état mardi 21 mai d'« indications » selon lesquelles Damas aurait mené une nouvelle « attaque » chimique dans le Nord-Ouest syrien, le 19 mai.

De retour à une stratégie insurrectionnelle depuis plusieurs mois, Daech multiplie de son côté les attaques contre les forces du régime et de son allié russe dans la Badiya, dans le sud-est du pays.

Deux fronts, deux stratégies, la crainte du franchissement d'une nouvelle « ligne rouge ». En menaçant le régime syrien de représailles, Washington a fait état d'« indications » selon lesquelles Damas aurait mené une nouvelle « attaque présumée au chlore », le matin du 19 mai, dans la province insurgée de Idlib, dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie. Alors que l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH) a déclaré, à ce stade, ne pas détenir de « preuves » suffisantes pour confir-



mer cette attaque vers Lattaquié, les États-Unis poursuivent leur enquête.

Faisant resurgir la crainte d'une offensive de grande ampleur sur cette dernière enclave tenue par des groupes djihadistes, dont Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (HTS) – considéré comme l'ex-branche syrienne d'Al-Qaïda –, les forces syriennes et russes ont intensifié, depuis fin avril, leurs attaques dans la région, une zone pourtant dite « de désescalade » en vertu de l'accord de Sotchi conclu fin septembre entre Moscou et Ankara.

« Ce dernier est remis en cause par ces affrontements, mais il

n'avait jamais été vraiment appliqué sur le terrain », écarte Fabrice Balanche, spécialiste de la Syrie et maître de conférences à l'université Lyon 2. Ces trois dernières semaines, 180 civils auraient péri dans les affrontements, selon l'OSDH. Et plus de 200 000 autres auraient fui, d'après l'ONU.

À plusieurs centaines de kilomètres de là, le régime demeure aussi aux prises avec les résidus de Daech retranchés dans la Badiya, vaste zone désertique du Sud-Est syrien. Le 16 mai, le groupe djihadiste a ainsi revendiqué l'attaque d'un convoi des forces loyalistes au sud-ouest de Palmyre, dans le centre du pays. Fomentée avec des missiles anti-chars guidés, leur embuscade aurait coûté la vie à plusieurs soldats syriens.

« Quand le régime syrien est occupé à l'Ouest, Daech semble en profiter pour agir dans le centre », analyse Thomas Pierret, chercheur au Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS). Cela montre que l'organisation est encore suffisamment équipée pour tirer parti de la situation. Depuis le mois de mars, ces djihadistes, chassés

de la région frontalière avec l'Irak par les Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS) épaulées par Washington, ne cessent de multiplier leurs attaques de guérilla.

« Quand le régime syrien est occupé à l'Ouest, Daech semble en profiter pour agir dans le centre. »

« Ces quelques centaines, ou quelques milliers, de combattants étrangers et syriens ne sont pas si isolés dans la Badiya, où ils ont noué des relations avec les populations locales, souligne Fabrice Balanche. Leur proximité avec le camp de réfugiés de Roqban, près de la Jordanie, leur permet notamment de se ravitailler, en éloignant la menace de frappes aériennes. » « Malgré leur faible nombre, ils ont gardé une réelle capacité de nuisance, renchérit Thomas Pierret. En face, les opérations de ratissage du régime se déroulent en terrain extrêmement hostile, alors que les hommes de Daech sont très mobiles... »

Malo Tresca

Turquie: levée de l'interdiction imposée au chef kurde Öcalan de voir ses avocats

Par AFP, Ankara - 16 mai 2019
www.lexpress.fr

L'interdiction de rencontrer ses avocats imposée depuis huit ans au chef historique détenu de la rébellion kurde Abdullah Öcalan, détenu en Turquie, a été levée jeudi, deux semaines après l'autorisation d'une première visite.

Malgré un isolement quasi total depuis sa capture et son incarcération sur l'île-prison d'Imrali près d'Istanbul en 1999, M. Öcalan reste une figure de référence pour la rébellion kurde en Turquie, où le conflit entre l'Etat et le Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), dont il fut l'un des fondateurs, a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis 1984.

"Les décisions interdisant des rencontres ont été levées et il est désormais possible pour lui d'en avoir", a déclaré le ministre turc de la Justice Abdülhamit Gül à la presse à Ankara.

Il a toutefois souligné que les rencontres d'un détenu avec ses avocats étaient un droit qui peut être limité pour des questions de sécurité.

Cette décision survient après l'autorisation le 2 mai d'une première visite en prison de deux des avocats du chef historique du PKK, un groupe classé "terroriste" par Ankara et ses alliés occidentaux.

Ils avaient relayé, la semaine dernière, un message dans lequel M. Öcalan appelait les centaines de personnes actuellement en grève de la faim dans les prisons turques pour protester contre ses conditions de détention à ne pas mettre leur vie en danger.

Il avait également appelé à "prendre en considération" les "sensibilités" de la Turquie en Syrie, où une milice kurde syrienne liée au PKK contrôle de vastes territoires dans le nord

du pays, au grand dam d'Ankara qui craint la création d'une entité kurde à ses frontières.

Un de ses avocats, Ibrahim Bilmez, a déclaré jeudi à l'AFP que "le plus important est d'obtenir une réponse positive à nos demandes d'entretien", après l'annonce de la levée de l'interdiction.

"Nous avons fait une demande pour un entretien demain (vendredi) et nous attendons" une réponse, a-t-il ajouté.

Dans un communiqué, le cabinet d'avocats Asrin Hukuk Bürosu, qui représente le détenu, souligne que depuis la visite du 2 mai, aucune autre n'a été autorisée malgré des demandes répétées.

Le texte insiste également sur l'importance d'autoriser les visites régulières des avocats à leur client, mais aussi les lettres et échanges téléphoniques de M. Öcalan avec eux et sa famille.

- PEINE DE MORT COMMUÉE -

Le frère de M. Öcalan, Mehmet, a pu lui rendre visite à la mi-janvier pour la première fois depuis 2016, à la faveur d'un geste d'apaisement consenti par les autorités après le lancement du mouvement de grève de la faim.

Le leader kurde avait été condamné à mort le 29 juin 1999 pour trahison et tentative de diviser la Turquie mais sa peine a été commuée en 2002 en réclusion à perpétuité, après l'abolition de la peine de mort en Turquie.

Selon le parti prokurde HDP, quelque 3.000 prisonniers sont actuellement en grève de la faim pour réclamer l'assouplissement des conditions de sa détention, la plupart ayant rejoint le mouvement par solidarité avec la députée prokurde Leyla Güven, qui refuse de s'alimenter depuis novembre dernier.

Huit personnes se sont par ailleurs suici-



Des portraits d'Abdullah Öcalan, chef historique de la rébellion kurde, lors d'une manifestation de soutien le 15 février 2019 à Beyrouth, au Liban, à l'occasion de sa 20e année de détention en Turquie
afp.com/JOSEPH EID

dées en prison depuis le début du mouvement, selon le HDP.

Depuis la rupture en 2015 d'un fragile cessez-le-feu dans le sud-est de la Turquie, le discours du président Recep Tayyip Erdogan au sujet des rebelles kurdes s'est nettement durci, faisant s'éloigner la perspective d'une solution politique négociée au conflit.

La décision annoncée jeudi survient également au moment où le parti au pouvoir, l'AKP, s'efforce de séduire les électeurs à Istanbul en vue de l'élection municipale prévue le 23 juin, après l'annulation du scrutin remporté par l'opposition fin mars.

Or de nombreux observateurs avaient estimé que le vote des Kurdes y avait été déterminant, le parti HDP ayant préféré soutenir le principal candidat de l'opposition, Ekrem Imamoglu, plutôt que de présenter son propre candidat.

Jailed PKK leader visit ban lifted, Turkish minister says

May 16, 2019 / ISTANBUL (Reuters) -

TURKEY has lifted a ban on lawyers visiting jailed Kurdish militant leader Abdullah Öcalan, Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül said on Thursday, two weeks after the first such visit was allowed since 2011.

Öcalan is the founder and leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group and has been imprisoned on an island near Istanbul since he was captured in 1999.

A formal lifting the ban on access by Öcalan's lawyers, just a month ahead of a re-run election in Istanbul, could lead to some of his supporters halting hunger strikes that they launched to protest his isolation.

"The decisions regarding a ban on visits has been lifted, providing for the possibility of visits," Gül told reporters in comments broadcast on Turkish television.

However Öcalan's lawyers said in a statement that despite repeated requests, they have not been granted a meeting with him since they saw him in jail on May 2. He has also not been allowed to see his family, they added.

The PKK launched a separatist insurgency in southeast Turkey in 1984 and more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict. Turkey, the United States and European Union designate the PKK as a terrorist group.

The pro-Kurdish Democratic Peoples' Party (HDP) say some 3,000 people, mostly prison inmates, are on the hunger strike, which was launched by HDP lawmaker Leyla Guven and is to demand regular access to Öcalan by his lawyers and family.

It was not immediately clear whether the latest move would lead to an end of the hunger strike.

➔ The minister's comments came amid preparations for a re-run of the Istanbul mayoral election next month. In a stinging upset, the opposition narrowly beat the candidate of President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party in the March 31 vote, but the result was annulled by the country's high election board.

KURDISH SUPPORT?

Some Turkish commentators have suggested the decision to allow the visit by Ocalan's lawyers was an attempt to win over Kurdish voters. The HDP supported the opposition in the March election and has indicated it will do the same on June 23.

Several days after the lawyers' visit on May 2, Ocalan issued a rare statement, in which he said those on hunger strike should not risk their

health or lives. The hunger strikers are consuming water, vitamins and sugar.

Ocalan, jailed on the island of Imrali, played a significant role in a peace process between Turkish authorities and the PKK. Those talks and a ceasefire broke down in 2015, unleashing some of the worst violence since the insurgency began.

Ocalan's statement also called on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to resolve problems in Syria without conflict. The PKK leader is revered by the Kurdish YPG militia, which forms the core of the U.S.-backed SDF.

Turkey says the YPG and PKK are one and the same and has waged two military incursions in northern Syria against the YPG. ●

Le Monde.fr 16 MAI 2019

Les services secrets turcs visés par la justice française pour trois assassinats

Une information judiciaire a été ouverte, mardi 14 mai, sur le meurtre de trois militantes kurdes, à Paris, en janvier 2013.

Par Jacques Follorou,
16 mai 2019
www.lemonde.fr

Dans le monde de l'espionnage, il est une règle non dite : tout est accepté sauf lorsque des services étrangers viennent tuer des gens sur votre sol. C'est sans doute ce qui a poussé la justice à rouvrir, mardi 14 mai, une enquête que l'on croyait close, celle de l'assassinat, le 9 janvier 2013, à Paris, de trois cadres du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), Sakine Cansiz, Fidan Dogan et Leyla Söylemez. L'unique suspect, le Turc Omer Güney, avait été renvoyé devant la cour d'assises spéciale de Paris, mais, décédé d'un cancer du cerveau en décembre 2016, la veille de son procès, l'action publique s'était éteinte.

L'affaire, rouverte pour des faits de complicité d'assassinats en relation avec une entreprise terroriste et d'association de malfaiteurs terroriste criminelle, et confiée à un juge antiterroriste, vise la possible responsabilité des services secrets turcs, le MIT. Son rôle éventuel est souligné dans plusieurs pièces versées par les familles des victimes dans une nouvelle plainte qui avait été déposée en mars 2018. D'autres éléments à charge ont été transmis par les justices belge et allemande,

elles aussi confrontées à des assassinats ou à des tentatives à l'encontre de responsables kurdes dans leur pays.

Les soupçons formels contre les services secrets turcs remontent à 2014. Lors d'une demande de déclassification de documents, la juge d'instruction française saisie du dossier Güney indiquait : « L'enquête judiciaire a mis en évidence que l'un des mobiles les plus plausibles de ce triple assassinat pouvait être mis en relation avec les activités supposées d'Omer Güney [le tireur présumé] en France au sein des services secrets turcs [MIT]. »

LIENS ÉTROITS AVEC LE MIT

Ses liens avec la communauté kurde apparaissaient comme très récents au moment des faits, laissant la place à l'hypothèse d'une infiltration préméditée. Les investigations avaient, de plus, permis d'établir qu'il avait multiplié les allers et retours avec la Turquie dans l'année qui a précédé le meurtre.

Par ailleurs, la sonorisation de ses parloirs, lors de son incarcération à Fresnes (Val-de-Marne), avait montré les liens étroits existant entre le suspect et des agents du MIT en Allemagne et en Belgique. Des perquisitions menées par la police allemande avaient confirmé le projet d'évasion de Güney monté avec l'appui logistique du MIT, prévue lors d'un séjour à l'hôpital parisien de la Salpêtrière. Enfin, un « ordre de mission » du MIT mentionnant le projet d'assassinat confié à l'accusé était versé à la procédure française après avoir été



Un poster accroché le 9 janvier 2014 sur la façade de la Mairie du 10ème arrondissement avec les portraits de Sakine Cansiz, figure historique du mouvement rebelle du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK) et proche de son fondateur Abdullah Ocalan et les deux autres militantes kurdes Fidan Dogan et Leyla Saylemez tuées par balles le 9 janvier 2013, dans les locaux du Centre d'information kurde (CIK) qui se trouvent dans le 10ème arrondissement – Arnaud GUILLAUME/SIPA

authentifié par les services secrets allemands. Cette pièce attestait la présence en France d'un diplomate pouvant jouer le rôle de coordination des actions menées contre les chefs du PKK réfugiés en Europe.

Ces accusations étaient renforcées par des informations transmises par la justice belge, saisie, en 2016, d'une plainte pour menaces de mort contre un responsable kurde, Remzi Kartal. Le 14 juin 2017, les policiers belges contrôlaient trois suspects, à Bruxelles, dans un véhicule immatriculé en France. Deux d'entre eux, qui communiquaient avec des numéros de téléphone français, montrèrent leur carte de police turque en guise de propriétaire de la voiture résidait,

lui, à Argenteuil (Val-d'Oise). Deux jours plus tard, selon la justice belge, ces deux hommes rencontreraient quatre autres Turcs à Paris. Parmi eux se trouvaient un policier turc de haut rang et « un tireur d'élite ».

Les soupçons visant la Turquie et le MIT ont été démentis par les autorités d'Ankara dès 2014. Aucun responsable des services secrets turcs n'a été, à ce jour, interrogé par la justice et donc susceptible de répondre aux accusations. Sollicité par Le Monde, mercredi, l'ambassadeur de Turquie, en France, Ismail Hakki Musa, n'a pas souhaité s'exprimer sur cette affaire.

Le Kurdistan inquiet des tensions Amérique-Iran

Les Etats-Unis exfiltrent du personnel du consulat d'Erbil et des pays européens mettent fin à la formation des Peshmergas kurdes

Adaptation par Marc Brzustowski
-Mai 20, 2019
www.jforum.fr

Les Etats-Unis ont ordonné à leurs employés sans mission urgente de quitter l'ambassade de Bagdad et le consulat à Erbil mercredi. Erbil est la capitale du gouvernement régional autonome du Kurdistan (KRG) et les habitants craignent que les tensions américano-iraniennes ne submergent désormais la région kurde à un moment sensible. La région du Kurdistan revêt une importance stratégique et constitue un centre de sécurité entre le gouvernement central irakien, la Turquie et l'Iran.

Au cours des deux dernières semaines, les États-Unis ont mis en garde contre les menaces iraniennes, dans toute la région et que toute attaque de l'Iran ou de ses supplétifs entraînera des représailles. Selon certaines informations, les États-Unis auraient également partagé des informations avec Bagdad et des alliés européens (NDLR JForum : malgré leur scepticisme fondé sur leur intérêt à la poursuite des relations avec Téhéran) indiquant des menaces directes iraniennes en Irak. Par exemple, un rapport arabe de la BBC a déclaré que Pompeo avait présenté aux Irakiens des preuves des projets iraniens, tandis que d'autres ont indiqué que des milices chiïtes soutenues par l'Iran avaient déployé des missiles en Irak.

La région du Kurdistan connaît bien les capacités de l'Iran. En septembre dernier, le corps des gardiens de la révolution islamique iraniens a lancé des missiles balistiques sur des groupes dissidents kurdes iraniens dans le nord de l'Irak, à Koya. Pendant des années, certains groupes kurdes opposés au régime de Téhéran se sont installés dans le nord de l'Irak. L'Iran a averti que toute action de ces groupes sera combattue par la force.

En outre, l'Iran a exercé d'autres pressions sur la région du Kurdistan. Comme Bagdad et la Turquie, il s'est opposé au référendum sur le Kurdistan en septembre 2017, au cours duquel des millions de membres du KRG ont voté pour l'indépendance. Mais l'Iran travaille de manière plus complexe pour influencer la politique kurde dans le nord de l'Irak. Il est parfois perçu à la fois comme une menace et comme un allié historique. Par exemple, lors de l'offensive menée par l'État islamique en août 2014, lorsque l'État islamique était aux portes d'Erbil, l'Iran était l'un des rares pays qui a cherché à contribuer à la lutte contre les extrémistes.

AUJOURD'HUI, ERBIL fait face à une nouvelle crise. Au moment où l'ordre du person-

nel américain au consulat d'Erbil était donné de partir, le marché immobilier était en pleine tourmente, craignant que la crise américano-iranienne ne porte atteinte à l'économie de la région. La région du Kurdistan en Irak est depuis longtemps la région la plus sûre du pays, à l'abri des menaces terroristes et au cœur d'une économie en plein essor. Ses principaux liens commerciaux se font par la Turquie, mais également vers l'Iran. Il a ses propres réseaux d'exportations de pétrole et deux aéroports internationaux.

La région n'est pas seulement un centre touristique, mais de nombreux Irakiens y ont élu domicile pour fuir les tensions confessionnelles et sectaires ailleurs. Les chrétiens minoritaires et les yézidis ont également fui l'État islamique dans la région du Kurdistan. En outre, les pays du Golfe et la Turquie investissent massivement dans l'économie du KRG. Le journaliste local Adam Lucente a déclaré avoir été témoin d'un «peu d'inquiétude parmi ses amis» à Erbil au milieu des tensions.

Mais les tensions américano-iraniennes rappellent maintenant les crises d'août 2014 et d'octobre 2017. Plus tard, l'armée irakienne a pris le contrôle de Kirkouk et a poussé les Peshmergas kurdes hors de la ville, menaçant d'agir contre Erbil en représailles contre le référendum. Les Peshmergas sont les forces armées du KRG. De plus, l'Irak a fermé les aéroports d'Erbil et de Sulaimaniyah pour étrangler l'économie kurde. Aujourd'hui, les choses sont revenues à la normale, mais Erbil craint les répercussions des tensions iraniennes. Bagdad, par exemple, paie de nombreux salaires de la fonction publique au sein du KRG. Une crise à Bagdad nuira à la région.

Alors que de nombreux habitants de la région du Kurdistan ne pensent pas que les États-Unis soient sérieux au sujet d'une guerre, ils sont toujours inquiets. «Si la situation perdure encore deux semaines, certaines personnes pourraient envisager de partir», a déclaré un homme d'affaires. Les investisseurs fortunés qui investissent habituellement dans la région peuvent transférer leur argent à l'étranger.

Entre temps, la région du Kurdistan est toujours dans un processus de nomination d'un président. Nechirvan Barzani, qui était Premier ministre, est le favori. Le Parti démocratique du Kurdistan (PDK) et l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan (UPK), les deux plus grands partis, doivent parvenir à un accord sur la composition du prochain gouvernement. La crise avec l'Iran arrive à un moment difficile car l'UPK est considérée comme plus proche de l'Iran, alors que le



DES MEMBRES KURDES du Parti démocratique du Kurdistan iranien traversent les montagnes d'Irak à Iran. (Crédit photo: COURTOISIE ZACH HUFF)

PDK est généralement plus proche des États-Unis. Cependant, après que les États-Unis ont refusé de prêter assistance au référendum sur l'indépendance de 2017, la région du Kurdistan est plus distante vis-à-vis des projets des États-Unis.

Diliman Abdulkader a tweeté que la région du Kurdistan serait probablement neutre face aux tensions à venir, à la lumière des souvenirs du référendum sur l'indépendance. Lucente a tweeté qu'il était d'accord.

Après que le secrétaire d'État américain Mike Pompeo se soit rendu à Bagdad le 8 mai, une délégation américaine de haut niveau s'est également rendue à Erbil. David Satterfield, secrétaire d'État adjoint par intérim aux Affaires du Proche-Orient, s'est rendu à Erbil pour rencontrer le dirigeant du PDK, Masoud Barzani, et le président du Conseil de sécurité régionale, Masrour Barzani. Le consul général des États-Unis, Steven Fagin, et le lieutenant général Paul LaCamera, de la coalition dirigée par les États-Unis, est également venu aux réunions. Les médias iraniens n'ont pas été pris au dépourvu, soulignant la réunion de Satterfield comme une «pression» américaine sur Erbil pour mettre fin à ses relations avec Téhéran. En fait, Washington tente de faire pression sur Erbil en ce qui concerne le commerce du pétrole et d'autres types de commerce avec l'Iran.

Le KRG tente d'améliorer ses relations extérieures par d'autres réunions de haut niveau avec l'ONU et le Royaume-Uni. Mais l'ancien envoyé américain anti-Daesh, Brett McGurk, s'est dit préoccupé par le fait que les États-Unis aient ordonné à leur personnel non essentiel de quitter l'Irak. En outre, l'Allemagne et les Pays-Bas ont tous deux suspendu l'entraînement de Peshmerga kurdes en raison des tensions. Les pays européens ont investi dans la formation des Peshmerga pour les aider à combattre Daesh et à renforcer leurs capacités. La décision des Pays-Bas et de l'Allemagne a déplu au PDK, qui a déclaré qu'ils reprendraient leurs missions dès que possible.

La région irakienne du Kurdistan est une zone stratégique importante reliant ➤

► la Turquie, l'Irak et l'Irak. C'est également important pour les États-Unis, qui le voient comme une zone fiable et sécurisée. L'Amérique a acheminé des équipements pour soutenir la mission anti-Daesh via Erbil, et l'ensemble de la région constitue un pivot de la sécurité pour enrayer la propagation des insurgés et des extrémistes basés entre Mossoul et Bagdad. Daesh menace tou-

jours les routes à proximité et a récemment brûlé des champs d'agriculteurs qui refusent de payer des "taxes" au groupe.

Toute instabilité avec l'Irak entraînera une résurgence de Daesh. En outre, l'Irak utilisera l'instabilité pour accroître son influence. Le Kurdistan est coincé entre les Iraniens et les États-Unis, ainsi que d'autres groupes.

Mais c'est aussi un canal et un pont central entre l'Irak et d'autres régions du Moyen-Orient.

By Seth J. Frantzman May 17, 2019
www.jpost.com

francetvinfo

23 mai 2019

Tarn : des familles yézidiennes victimes de Daech accueillies sur 3 sites

28 femmes yézidiennes accompagnées de leurs enfants sont arrivées hier dans la soirée à l'aéroport de Toulouse-Blagnac. Une partie d'entre elles sont accueillies ce jeudi dans le Tarn.

Par Christine Ravier le 23/05/2019
france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/

Des familles yézidiennes sont arrivées ce mercredi 22 mai dans la soirée à Toulouse, à l'aéroport de Blagnac. Une partie a été conduite dans le Tarn. Douze femmes accompagnées de leurs enfants, y seront accueillies : sept à Carmaux, douze à Blaye-les-Mines et trois à Saint-Benoît-de-Carmaux.

Les familles sont logées par Tarn Habitat dans des logements vacants du bailleur. L'association "Habitat et Humanisme" va prendre en charge leur suivi. Des bénévoles les ont accueillis hier soir après que la Croix-Rouge les ait acheminés vers leurs logements, en présence d'interprètes kurdes.

Toutes les familles ont rejoint leurs nouveaux domiciles entre 23h et 23h30 dans le calme. Très fatigués, les réfugiés se sont dits pressés d'aller se reposer.

Au total, 132 yézidis ont quitté Erbil, la capitale du Kurdistan irakien, a indiqué le Quai d'Orsay. Les maris de ces femmes ont été tués ou ont été portés disparus.

VICTIMES DE CRIMES

L'arrivée de ce nouveau groupe fait suite à l'accueil de 16 familles le



Plus de 130 membres de la communauté yézidienne ont quitté l'aéroport international d'Erbil pour Toulouse / © IOM Press

19 décembre dernier. Il répond à l'engagement de la France auprès de Nadia Murad, leur porte-parole, esclave sexuelle de l'Etat islamique et prix Nobel de la paix 2018, à accueillir une centaine de familles yézidiennes.

"Ces femmes, particulièrement éprouvées par les exactions de l'organisation terroriste, sont prises en charge dans différents départements français" a indiqué le ministère des Affaires étrangères. Sur les 550.000 yézidis présents en Irak avant la percée jihadiste, près de 100.000 ont quitté le pays. D'autres sont déplacés au Kurdistan.

La communauté yézidienne constitue une minorité religieuse. Le yézidisme est une religion monothéiste. Elle plonge ses racines dans l'Irak antique 10.000 ans avant Jésus-Christ.

LE FIGARO · fr 22 MAI 2019

Turquie : prison pour sept journalistes condamnés pour «propagande terroriste»

Par Le Figaro avec AFP le 22/05/2019

Sept journalistes d'un journal pro-kurde fermé par les autorités ont été condamnés à des peines de prison pour «propagande terroriste», ont rapporté mercredi les médias.

Les sept journalistes travaillaient pour le journal Ozgur Gundem, fermé par décret-loi en 2016 sous l'accusation de propagande du

Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), en lutte armée contre l'Etat turc. Au total 24 journalistes d'Ozgur Gundem étaient jugés dans le cadre d'un procès pour «propagande terroriste» et sept d'entre eux, dont les rédacteurs en chef Eren Keskin et Huseyin Aykol, ont été condamnés à des peines de prison allant de 15 à 45 mois lors d'une audience qui s'est tenue mardi.

Gundem. La Turquie est régulièrement pointée du doigt par les organisations de défense de la liberté de la presse, qui dénoncent la multiplication depuis un coup d'Etat manqué en 2016 des arrestations de journalistes et des fermetures de médias. La Turquie occupe la 157ème place sur 180 au classement 2018 de la liberté de la presse établi par l'ONG Reporters sans frontières (RSF).

Plusieurs journalistes et écrivains turcs ont été condamnés à la prison ferme, ou sont poursuivis en justice, pour avoir participé à une campagne de solidarité avec Ozgur

Who will rule the north? The Kurds are creating a state of their own in northern Syria

But the would-be nation of Rojava faces many enemies

May 23rd 2019

| KOBANE AND RAQQA

www.economist.com



THE KURDS have their own name for northern Syria: Rojava, which means where the sun sets. For decades that seemed fitting. Arab nationalists pushed them off their land and suppressed their language. Then came the jihadists of Islamic State (IS). War with them levelled cities. But with IS defeated those cities are rising again. One of the largest, Kobane, is bigger and taller than before. It sports a towering war memorial and is hosting its second art fair. “We’ve had enough of the pain,” says Brivan Hammoush, a landscape artist.

Over the course of Syria’s multi-sided civil war, which began in 2011, the Kurds captured a third of the country (see map). In 2016 they declared their own autonomous region in Rojava, which contains most of Syria’s oilfields, its highest dams and its bread basket. Trade routes as old as the Silk Road run through the territory. Such valuable land is a boon to Rojava’s Kurdish-led administration. But it also attracts enemies. As they rebuild their region, the Kurds face threats, at home and from abroad. And many fear their strongest ally, America, will abandon them at the drop of a tweet.

For now things are looking up. Fighting, sanctions and a lack of funds stymie reconstruction in most of Syria, but juggernauts loaded with diggers and cement queue for miles at Rojava’s border with Iraq. Convoys of petrol tankers ply the highways to

Damascus. Western-funded aid agencies repair infrastructure, hospitals and schools in the region. The parliament, formed in September, still meets in a high school. But that also means that politicians are accessible. Your correspondent got a meeting with the two heads of government simply by knocking on their office door.

On social issues Rojava’s leaders are rather progressive compared with those in much of the Middle East. Polygamy is outlawed. A man and a woman co-lead every office in government. A woman runs Raqqa, which IS once declared its capital. Few, if any, senior female officials wear a veil. The Kurds, though Muslim, are distinctly relaxed about it—they openly drink and smoke during the Ramadan fast. Faith is considered a private matter. To the delight of America’s evangelicals, a new church has opened in Kobane for the growing number of Christian converts.

But Rojava’s new rulers owe their power to gun-toting revolutionary committees, not the ballot box. They emerged from the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), which is based in northern Iraq and considered a terrorist group by many countries. Rojava has the trappings of a repressive one-party state. Protests are censured and opposition parties harassed. Officials say they are better than the regime of Bashar al-Assad, Syria’s dictator, or the rebels who fought him—a miser-

ably low bar. “It’s just another totalitarian regime,” says a Kurdish journalist who fled abroad.

Rojava’s demography makes ruling hard. There are thought to be between 500,000 and 1m Kurds in the region, compared with at least 1.5m Arabs. So Kurdish officials have tried to broaden their appeal. In September they replaced the name Rojava with the more inclusive, but wordy, “autonomous administration of north and east Syria” (NES). They also moved the administrative capital from Qamishli, a Kurdish city, to Ain Issa, a drab Arab town. Arabs have been appointed to many senior positions in government. “We’re seeking a geographic federation, not an ethnic federation,” says Polat Can, a commander in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the local army. Half of Mr Can’s soldiers are Arab.

Still, the Arabs in Rojava feel increasingly alienated. Kurdish forces known as the People’s Protection Units, or YPG, lead the SDF. “Kurd or Arab?” ask guards of visitors at a military base. Arab sheikhs claim the Kurds have seized their land and are imposing their own customs. “They want us to bring our wives to tribal gatherings,” fumes one who considers such mingling of the sexes improper. Some speak of the Kurdish “occupation”. Protesters near Deir al-Zour’s oil wells have blocked access with burning tyres. “The Kurds”, they chant, “have stolen our oil.”

Turkey in the north and Mr Assad’s government in the south prey on the differences. They have each held tribal gatherings in an attempt to win over the Arabs of Rojava. Turkey wants to carve out a buffer zone on its southern border, which might contain Kurdish cities. Rojava, it says, offers the PKK a rear base to continue its 40-year war against the Turkish government. West of Manbij, Turkish tanks train their turrets on Kurdish positions. The Kurds have no air force and little heavy weaponry. They are no match for the Turkish army.

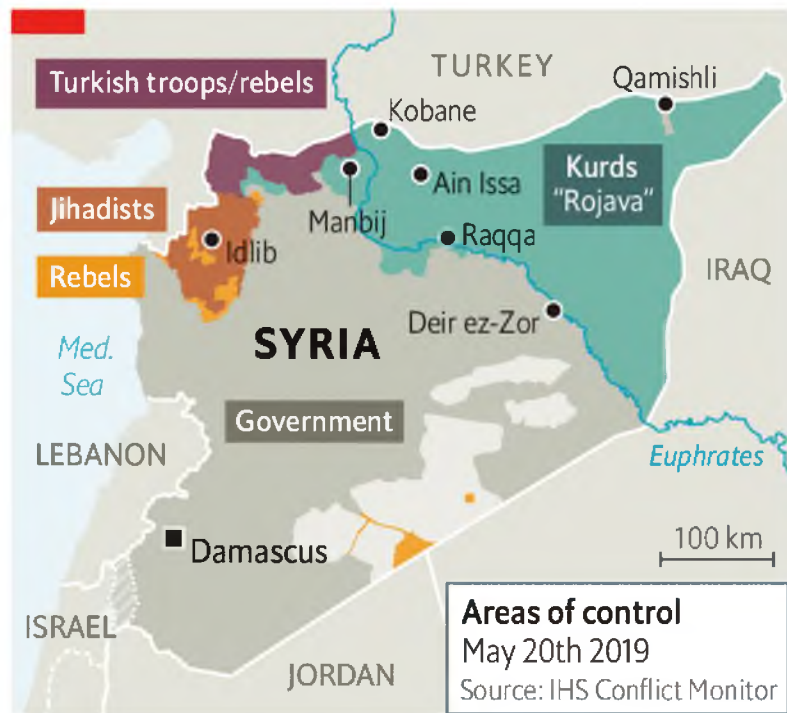
Nor can they challenge the army of Mr Assad, who says he wants to reclaim all of Syria. He is currently focused on Idlib, the last rebel stronghold. At the height of the war Mr Assad pulled his troops from the north to defend Damascus; the Kurds did not fight them. But the regime still holds some sway in Rojava. It runs the mobile-phone network and oversees many courts and schools. In the region’s only civilian airport, controlled by the regime, portraits of the dictator are ubiquitous and travellers who work for the NES risk arrest. A proposal by Russia, which backs Mr Assad, would have the Syrian army return to Rojava and turn Kurdish forces into local police.

Meanwhile, the threat of IS lingers. The jihadists set up impromptu checkpoints on highways. A ban on motorbikes in war-shattered Raqqa has only partially succeeded in curbing attacks on infrastructure. Officials describe camps crammed with displaced and disgruntled Arabs as potential

⇒ incubators of jihadism. Many women in the region, still fearful of IS, continue to wear niqabs.

The Kurds are reassured by the presence of America. Some 2,000 of its troops are spread across the territory. Its warplanes buzz overhead and its forces deter the Turks. President Donald Trump appears to have backtracked from his tweet in December ordering a pullout from Syria. But uncertainty over America's intentions complicates life for the Kurds. The local administration has found it harder to recruit and retain Arabs. Even the Kurds are hedging their bets. Rojava's leaders recently went to Damascus for talks with Mr Assad's intelligence chief. The founder of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, has urged them to "take account of Turkish sensitivities".

Kurdish leaders in Syria aspire to be America's permanent ally, like the Kurds next door in Iraq. But Rojava, unlike the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq, lacks UN recognition. "You don't know how long it's going to last," says a teacher in Qamishli. "You feel it's built on sand."◆



The Economist



23 May 2019

French-Peshmerga op kills 3 extremists in Tuz Khurmatu

By Rudaw.net 23/5/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region — At least three Islamic State (ISIS) militants were killed on Thursday in a joint operation launched by Peshmerga and French military forces on the fringes of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq, outside disputed Tuz Khurmatu, according to local and Peshmerga sources.

"Today a French force together with [a special Peshmerga force] carried out an operation using aircraft in Shoraw, Palkana and Gharra villages," Jamal Salih, the mayor of Naujul town, told Rudaw.

The Kurdistan Region's armed forces, the Peshmerga, have a number of forces inside and outside of the official ministry. Specialty units are sometimes trained by internationalists in counterterrorism, mine clearance, urban fighting, and other areas of warfare.

A senior Peshmerga official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed that a French force accompanied the Peshmerga in the operation near the Palkana village close to Tuz Khurmatu — not to be confused with Palkana in western Kirkuk, close to Erbil province.

The three villages are located are in Naujul town which is between

Kifri and Tuz Khurmatu in the Garmiyan administration — areas of the Kurdistan Region which border Iran.

Tuz Khurmatu is a disputed city claimed by Erbil and Baghdad is to Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen. Iraqi forces have managed the security portfolio of the city, including after the events of October 16, 2017.

The media office for Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) confirmed by email on Friday that the coalition did participate in operations in the area on Thursday. However they did not elaborate on what forces participated.

"Coalition Forces did support clearance operations targeting Daesh south of the Polkana Mountains on May 23," wrote CJTF-OIR Media Operations in an email to Rudaw English.

French diplomats in Iraq were not able to comment.

Mayor Salih said in addition to the killing of three ISIS militants, several weapons depots belonging to the group were destroyed. He added that visible ISIS fighters have emptied 13 of 42 local villages.

The militants are essentially free to operate in the vacuum between Iraqi and Peshmerga forces where

security gaps have been exposed after federal forces ousted the Peshmerga in the aftermath of the Kurdistan Region's independence referendum of September 2017.

To the west in the disputed areas, notably Makhmour some 60 kilometers southwest of Erbil, extremists continue to maintain a presence instilling fear among locals as they kill, torch farmlands and forcefully take taxes from them.

Sirwan Barzani, a Peshmerga commander on the Makhmour-Gwer Front, told Rudaw on Thursday that "the security situation of the Qaraj is in danger."

Qarachogh Mountain, the Qaraj Plains, and the Zab area near Makhmour are areas connecting Erbil, Nineveh, Kirkuk and Saladin provinces.

Barzani said to remove the threats they have "called on the coalition and Iraqi Army for a joint operation in the region."

"The Peshmerga's demand is to station on the heights to prevent any possible reemergence of ISIS. The Iraqi Army has so far failed to take control of the area," he said.

"They have not yet responded to our call," Barzani claimed.

ISIS militants seized Makhmour and surrounding villages in 2014



A member of the Peshmerga, stands guard near Tuz Khurmatu, 70 kilometres south of Kirkuk on June 24, 2014. File photo: Marwan Ibrahim AFP

before they were quickly routed in a combined operation led by the Peshmerga — supported by the coalition and fighters from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Although the jihadist group was declared defeated in Iraq in December 2017, its remnants have retreated into Iraq's deserts and mountains, where they have resumed earlier strategies of hit-and-run tactics of kidnap, ambush, bombing, and execution. ■

Nechirvan Barzani elected Kurdistan Region president

By Rudaw.net 28/5/2019

ERBIL, Kurdistan Region – Nechirvan Barzani has been elected president of the Kurdistan Region.

Eighty-one MPs were present in the Region's 111-seat parliament to cast their vote in Tuesday's session. Nechirvan, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) candidate, secured 68 votes.

His four rivals secured zero votes.

Nechirvan, nephew of former president Masoud Barzani, will step down as prime minister to assume the role.

In mid-June, the president-elect is expected to ask his cousin, Masrour Barzani, to form the new cabinet.

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which holds 21 seats in the legislature against the KDP's 45, issued a statement ahead of the session saying the KDP has not adhered to their prior agreements. They would therefore not participate in the vote.

"We haven't seen the smallest step from our KDP brothers. We haven't seen even good intent towards one section of both our agreements from our KDP brothers," PUK spokesperson Latif Shiekh Omer told reporters in Sulaimani ahead of the vote on Tuesday.

"Unilateralism in Kurdistan will not succeed, and it shouldn't succeed, and it should be prevented," Omer added.

KDP spokesperson Mahmud Mohammed expressed regret over the PUK not participating in the session.

"Unfortunately, PUK friends reneged on the agreements and didn't take part in the parliament meeting to elect a president for the Region without taking into account the sensitive situation of the Region, ignoring the expectations of the people of Kurdistan



Parliament on Tuesday elected Nechirvan Barzani as the new President of the autonomous Kurdistan Region.

and the will of the nation," he wrote on his Facebook page on Tuesday.

This is while "we need a strong government and unity in Kurdistan," Mohammed implored.

"In light of the PUK reneging on the agreements and its efforts to waste time in the past several months, one can unfortunately suspect that they had right from the beginning aimed the political process to be delayed, paralyzed and not reach a result," he added.

Kirkuk and the KDP's failure to agree to the appointment of a PUK governor to the disputed province remains a key stumbling block.

This didn't stop the PUK's Qubad Talabani, the Region's deputy prime minister, congratulating Nechirvan on his election.

"I am proud to have worked alongside him for five difficult years. I am confident that his competence and vision will guarantee success in this challenging responsibility, part of which would include putting the Kurdish house in order," he tweeted.

New Generation, meanwhile, boycotted the whole process, arguing the presidency law does not serve democracy or the parliamentary system.

Omed Khoshnaw, head of the KDP parliamentary bloc, told a press conference immediately following the vote that the PUK boycott would have "negative consequences".

"The process will not stop. We elected the president and we will form the government," he said.

Later in the day, officials and diplomats wished Barzani well in his future role.

WHO IS NECHIRVAN IDRIS MUSTAFA BARZANI?

- Born on September 21, 1966 in Haji Omaran

- Displaced to Iran along with his family in 1975

- Student of political science at Tehran University

- Elected member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) politburo in 1989

- Elected deputy prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1996

- Elected prime minister of the KRG's fourth cabinet in 1999

- Elected prime minister of the KRG in 2006 (unified cabinet)

- Elected prime minister of the KRG from 2011 to 2013

- Elected prime minister of the

KRG from 2013 to 2018

- Elected deputy president of the KDP during the party's 13th congress

- Nominated by KDP for the presidency on December 3, 2018

- Married father of five

THE PRESIDENT-ELECT'S REACTION

Barzani issued a statement following his election thanking the parliament for placing confidence in him as president.

"I reassure the beloved people of Kurdistan that the Presidency of the Region will be an umbrella for unity, bringing together all the political parties of Kurdistan and its various ethnic and religious communities for the sake of a peaceful coexistence of the Kurdistan nation," Barzani said.

With issues still unresolved between Baghdad such as the disputed areas, oil, and Peshmerga-Iraqi forces cooperation, the president-elect said the Iraqi constitution will guide his work.

"Social peace, guaranteeing social and individual rights, will be our main aim, through resolving all the problems between the Region and the federal government by dialogue within the framework of the constitution," he added.

Barzani wants to continue in his endeavors to strengthen Erbil's ties regionally and internationally.

Our main objective will also be to "protect friendly and strong relations with neighboring countries and the region, and continuing to strengthen the position and weight of the Kurdistan Region in the region and globally," he said.

Although predominately home to ethnic Kurds who are Sunni Muslim, the Kurdistan Region is one of the most diverse areas of the Middle East home to Arabs, Turkmen, Yazidis, Christians, and other ethno-religious groups.

"The Kurdistan Region is home to all the different communities of Kurdistan. And the Presidency of the Region will strive to respond to their will and rights without any discrimination," Barzani said. ■



28 mai 2019

Netchirvan Barzani élu président du Kurdistan irakien par le Parlement

Par RFI, avec agences le 28-05-2019 <http://www.rfi.fr>

Le Premier ministre sortant Netchirvan Barzani, neveu et gendre du leader historique kurde Massoud Barzani, a été choisi par 68 députés dans un Parlement boycotté par le principal parti d'opposition de la région autonome.

Avec Netchirvan Barzani, 52 ans, le Kurdistan irakien reste aux mains du clan Bardani. 68 des 81 députés présents (sur 111) ce mardi 28 mai ont voté pour lui, mais la séance était boycottée par une partie de l'opposition, à l'appel de l'Union patriotique du Kurdistan (UPK), grand rival du Parti démocratique du Kurdistan (PDK).

Fort de ce succès, Netchirvan Barzani devient le deuxième président de la région autonome après son oncle Massoud Barzani, qui a occupé le poste de sa création en 2005 jusqu'à fin 2017. Il pourrait nommer son cousin Masrour Barzani pour lui succéder comme Premier ministre.

Région divisée

L'UPK du défunt président irakien Jalal Talabani, qui réclame un partage clair du pouvoir, ne reconnaît pas ni cette élection ni les résultats des législatives de septembre 2018. « Le Parti démocratique du Kurdistan ne doit pas mettre sur la touche ou marginaliser d'autres partenaires politiques et [...] prendre des décisions unilatérales », a mis en garde ce mardi le porte-parole de l'UPK, Cheikh Omar.

Le Kurdistan irakien, qui a gagné son autonomie en 1991, est depuis miné par des divisions internes. En 2017 encore, la région s'est attiré les foudres du pouvoir central de Bagdad, en raison de l'organisation par le président Massoud Barzani d'un référendum d'indépendance, remporté par le « oui ».

En représailles, Bagdad a notamment repris la région de Kirkouk, riche en pétrole. Depuis, le Kurdistan est fragilisé sur le plan



Netchirvan Barzani, nouveau président du Kurdistan irakien, ici lors des élections législatives du 12 mai 2018, à Erbil (photo d'illustration). REUTERS/Azad Lashkari/File Photo

économique comme politique.

Netchirvan Barzani, 22 ans à la gouvernance du Kurdistan irakien

Kurde né dans le nord de l'Irak, Netchirvan Barzani a passé une partie de sa vie en exil en Iran et parle couramment kurde, farsi et anglais et l'arabe. Il accède une première fois aux responsabilités en 1996, à 30 ans, en devenant vice-Premier ministre du Kurdistan irakien – qui a obtenu l'autonomie en 1991. Puis, trois ans plus tard, il est nommé chef du gouvernement, qui n'a alors le pouvoir que sur le nord et l'ouest de la région.

Lors de la réunification du pouvoir en 2006, Netchirvan Barzani se retrouve à la tête du premier gouvernement d'union. Remplacé par Barham Saleh, alors haut dirigeant de l'UPK et aujourd'hui président de l'Irak, il retrouve le poste en 2012 et le conserve jusqu'à son élection comme président. Il est marié à la fille de Massoud Barzani, avec laquelle il a eu deux filles et trois garçons. ●



31 mai 2019

Irak: des explosions font au moins 7 morts et des dizaines de blessés à Kirkouk

Par RFI avec agences le 31-05-2019 <http://www.rfi.fr>

Six explosions ont retenti dans la nuit du 30 au 31 mai dans cette ville pétrolière du nord de l'Irak. Le commandement militaire de la région a désigné l'organisation État islamique comme responsable, dans un contexte de tensions.

Depuis début mai, les affrontements autour de la ville de Kirkouk se multiplient entre groupes jihadistes et membres des forces armées irakiennes. Si le califat du groupe EI a été officiellement défait en Irak il y a deux ans, des groupes de combattants se sont en effet reconstitués, en particulier dans les montagnes de la région de Kirkouk.

Les jihadistes bénéficient également des divisions qui règnent entre les acteurs politiques régionaux autour de la ville pétrolière, capitale de la région. Des clivages d'ailleurs mis en évidence par les réactions aux

explosions de ce jeudi.

Autorités divisées

Les membres des partis politiques kurdes, qui ont contrôlé la ville de 2014 à 2017 avant d'en être chassés par le gouvernement national, appellent ainsi au retour de leurs forces armées kurdes pour sécuriser la ville. Alors que le leader chiite irakien, Moqtada al-Sadr, a, de son côté, menacé d'envoyer les milices chiites sécuriser la ville si l'armée irakienne ne le faisait pas.

Ces derniers jours, les autorités irakiennes accusent l'organisation État islamique d'avoir incendié des champs de paysans kurdes dans la région. Mais des rumeurs font porter la responsabilité aux milices chiites. D'autres habitants, arabes cette fois, accusent les kurdes d'avoir volé leurs terrains lorsque Kirkouk était encore sous contrôle de la région autonome. ●

Intel: How Iraq's Kurds are failing to come together over their new president

Al-Monitor Staff / May 28, 2019
www.al-monitor.com

Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), was elected president by the semi-autonomous region's parliament today in a session that was boycotted by the second largest party.

Barzani, who is the nephew and son-in-law of the enclave's veteran leader and former President Massoud Barzani, won 68 votes from 81 members present in the 111-member chamber. Members of the opposition Gorran (Change) Movement as well as Turkmens and Assyrians joined Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to push through the nomination despite the unexpected defection of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

In explaining its abstention, the PUK cited differences with the KDP over whom to back as the new governor of the oil-rich province of Kirkuk. New Generation, a fledgling opposition party, also boycotted the vote, saying it disagreed with how the new president was being elected.

WHY IT MATTERS: The KDP says it had a deal with the PUK's deputy secretary-general, Kosrat Rasool, to nominate a joint candidate, Faraidoun Abdulqadir, as governor of Kirkuk. "Everything was in place until 10 p.m. last night when the PUK politburo sent three other names for Kirkuk instead," KDP lawmaker Hemin Hawrami told Al-Monitor.

Turkey elections Voters' economic confidence dips ahead of key Istanbul vote

The sides had already decided on the PUK's share of Cabinet posts in the KRG. Gorran and the PUK were each to be given a vice presidential post as part of the deal. The KDP said in a statement that the PUK had blatantly violated the agreement, indicating that the opposition party's role in the new government is now up in the air.

Another sticking point concerns which candidate to tap for justice minister in the central government in Baghdad, a post that is usually reserved for Kurds. Hawrami said the sides had agreed on nominating a nonpartisan figure, but this has also fallen through. "This situation clearly stems from internal divisions within the PUK," Hawrami said.

Bilal Wahab, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, concurred. Wahab said intra-party squabbles would likely further weaken the faction-riven PUK, but that the KRG as a whole also stands to lose.

"A new government with a diminished PUK role will be formed for sure, but it won't be stable or strong because its power will be limited to Erbil," Wahab told Al-Monitor. He was referring to the capital of the Kurdish region



where the KDP holds sway. The PUK is the dominant force in Sulaimaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan's second largest city. One point in the new president's favor is that his mother was from Sulaimaniyah, which allows him to reach out to local residents in a way that none of the other clan members in power can.

WHAT'S NEXT: Barzani is expected to be sworn in as president by June 10 and then ask his cousin and brother-in-law, Masrour Barzani, to form a new Cabinet. The younger Barzani is currently in charge of the KRG's intelligence services.

A new round of horse trading over which party gets which Cabinet posts will likely ensue. Hawrami said the new government would be formed "with or without the PUK."

The PUK's Qubad Talabani will likely stay on as deputy prime minister. The urbane younger son of the late PUK founder Jalal Talabani gets on well with the Barzanis and has helped keep relations civil between the rival parties.

Ashti Hawrami, the powerful energy minister and a protege of the president-elect, had been expected to retain his much-coveted post in the now lapsed deal with the PUK. However, it remains unclear whether he will be able to do so in a reshuffled deck. What seems certain is that Massoud Barzani will continue to have a say. ♦

- Amberin Zaman



Turkey launches military operation against Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq

Daren Butler/ May 28, 2019 / ISTANBUL (Reuters) -

Turkey's military dropped commandos on mountain ridges in a new operation against Kurdish militants based over the border in northern Iraq, the defence ministry said on Tuesday.

The push began with artillery and air strikes on Monday afternoon, and the operation by commando brigades began that evening, according to a ministry statement.

It said the operation targeted Iraq's Hakurk region, just across the border from Turkey's southeastern tip, which also borders Iran. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militant group is based in northern Iraq, notably in the Qandil region to the south of Hakurk.

"With this operation, the aim is to destroy the caves and shelters used by the terrorist organisation and neutralise terrorists in the Hakurk region,"



the ministry said.

Video published by the ministry showed helicopters landing commandos on mountainous terrain. It also shared photos showing shells fired ➤

➤ by howitzers and soldiers perched on ridges, surveying hillsides with their rifles.

“The operation, with the support of our attack helicopters, is continuing as planned,” the statement said. The military frequently launches air strikes against PKK targets in northern Iraq but ground operations are less common.

Nine militants were “neutralised” so far in the operation, the ministry said later in the day, using a term to refer to deaths, injuries or captures.

It added that shelters and ammunition depots were also struck in air strikes in Qandil and Zap, another nearby region.

The PKK launched an insurgency in mainly Kurdish southeast Turkey in 1984 and more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict. It is designated a terrorist group by Ankara, the European Union and United States.

There was no comment from the PKK on the operation. ●

REUTERS

Kurdish MPs, prisoners end hunger strike in Turkey

Daren Butler / May 26, 2019 / ISTANBUL (Reuters) -

SEVERAL KURDISH lawmakers and thousands of prison inmates in Turkey have ended their hunger strike, heeding a call from jailed militant leader Abdullah Ocalan, MPs said on Sunday, 200 days after the protest was launched

The decision removed a source of tension in mainly Kurdish southeast Turkey after Ankara let Ocalan meet his lawyers this month for the first time since 2011, triggering speculation about possible fresh efforts to end conflict in the region.

Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) lawmaker Leyla Guven began a hunger strike in November in a bid to end Ocalan's years of isolation by securing him regular access to his family and lawyers.

“Comrades who have committed themselves to hunger strikes and death fasts, I expect you to end your protest,” Ocalan said in a statement read out by one of his lawyers at a news conference in Istanbul on Sunday morning.

Ocalan has been held in an island prison since Turkish special forces captured him in Kenya in 1999 and is revered among Kurdish HDP supporters who see him as key to any peace process.

On Wednesday, the lawyers visited him for the second time this month. Authorities had repeatedly rejected earlier requests to visit him, citing reasons including ship repairs and poor weather.

In Diyarbakir, the southeast's largest city, a hunger-striking MP announced the end of the protest at a news conference. Hunger strikers' mothers, wearing white headscarves, applauded and chanted in Kurdish “long live the prison resistance.”

The lawyers' visits resumed a month before a re-run of the Istanbul mayoral election and prompted speculation of steps towards a new peace process four years after Ankara's talks with Ocalan on ending conflict in southeast Turkey fell apart.

However, Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul has denied there is any connection.

Some commentators have suggested the decision to allow lawyers to visit Ocalan could be an attempt to win over Kurdish voters by the AK Party.

In March's Istanbul mayoral election, the HDP supported the opposition candidate who narrowly beat President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party candidate.

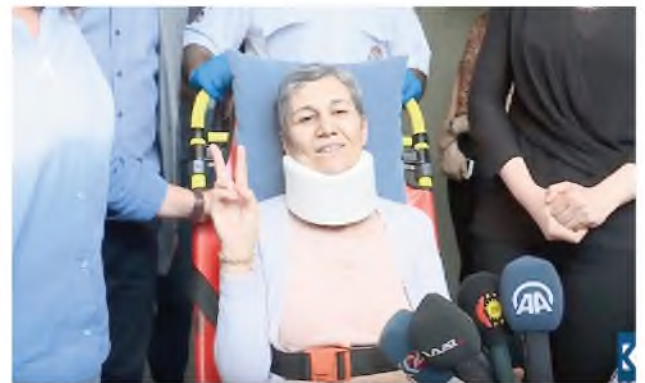
Election authorities annulled the vote, citing irregularities. The HDP has indicated it will again support the opposition in the June 23 election re-run.

Kurds make up around 15 percent of Istanbul's population of more than 15 million and mostly vote for either the pro-Kurdish HDP or the AK Party.

OCALAN OFFERS ROLE ON SYRIA

Before being transported to hospital by ambulance, Guven said the hunger strike had achieved its goal.

“But our struggle against isolation and our struggle for social peace will continue in all areas. This struggle must lead to an honourable peace,”



Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) lawmaker Leyla Guven, who ends her hunger strike after a call from jailed militant leader Abdullah Ocalan, flashes a V-victory sign as she leaves her home to go to hospital in Diyarbakir, Turkey, May 26, 2019. REUTERS/Sertac Kayar

she said in a written statement.

Ocalan is the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the European Union and United States.

His lawyer Newroz Uysal cited him as saying Ankara's permission for lawyers to meet him did not mean there was a negotiation process. But Ocalan said he was ready to play a positive role on issues concerning Syria.

Earlier in May, Ocalan called on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to resolve disputes in Syria without conflict. Ankara views the YPG militia, which forms the core of the U.S.-backed SDF, as part of the PKK.

Guven was joined on hunger strike by three more MPs, around 3,000 inmates in prisons across Turkey and activists abroad, according to her party, the third largest in parliament.

The HDP said seven people, six in Turkish prisons and one in Germany, had killed themselves in March in protest against Ocalan's isolation. Guven had been consuming water, vitamins and sugar during the hunger strike.

The PKK launched a separatist insurgency in southeast Turkey in 1984. More than 40,000 people have been killed in fighting since, mostly Kurds.

In November 2012, Ocalan made a similar call to end a hunger strike by prisoners. A month later it emerged that he was in talks with Ankara on a peace process.

Those talks and a ceasefire broke down in 2015, unleashing some of the worst violence since the insurgency began. Erdogan's AK Party has since formed an alliance with nationalists who revile Ocalan and who fiercely opposed the peace process. ●

En Turquie, des détenus cessent leur grève de la faim en soutien à Abdullah Öcalan

Ankara, 26 mai 2019 (AFP)
www.france24.com

À l'appel du leader kurde emprisonné Abdullah Öcalan, des milliers de prisonniers kurdes ont mis fin, dimanche, à la grève de la faim qu'ils menaient pour protester contre les conditions de détention du cofondateur du PKK.

Des prisonniers en Turquie ont annoncé dimanche avoir mis un terme à une grève de la faim suivie par plusieurs milliers d'entre eux pour protester contre les conditions de détention du leader kurde Abdullah Öcalan, après un appel de ce dernier en ce sens.

Des avocats d'Abdullah Öcalan, l'un des fondateurs du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), une organisation classée "terroriste" par Ankara et ses alliés occidentaux, avaient transmis un peu plus tôt dimanche un message de leur client appelant à la fin du mouvement, dont "l'objectif (...) a été atteint".

L'interdiction faite à Abdullah Öcalan de voir ses avocats depuis 2011 a en effet été levée la semaine dernière, et il a pu s'entretenir avec eux deux fois ce mois-ci.

"Votre objectif en ce qui me concerne a été atteint et je voudrais vous présenter toute mon affection et ma gratitude", a déclaré le leader kurde selon un texte lu à Istanbul par son avocate, Nevroz Uysal.

Selon le parti prokurde HDP, quelque 3 000 prisonniers ont rejoint ces derniers mois le mouvement initié par la députée prokurde Leyla Güven, qui refusait de s'alimenter depuis novembre dernier pour protester contre l'isolement imposé à Abdullah Öcalan.

Leur représentant, Deniz Kaya, a annoncé



Deux des avocats du chef historique de la rébellion kurde Abdullah Öcalan, Nevroz Uysal (d) et Ibrahim Bilmez, lors d'une conférence de presse le 26 mai 2019 à Istanbul / AFP

dans un communiqué la fin de leur mouvement "à l'appel" d'Abdullah Öcalan. Leyla Güven a suivi peu après.

"Si seulement on avait gagné sans subir de pertes", a-t-elle toutefois déploré, faisant allusion aux huit prisonniers qui se sont suicidés depuis le début du mouvement.

Parlant à des journalistes à Diyarbakir (sud-est), avant d'être amenée à l'hôpital pour un contrôle, elle a salué "une victoire de la démocratie turque", jugeant "très important pour la démocratisation de la Turquie et la paix au Moyen-Orient que la voix de M. Öcalan" puisse être entendue.

Malgré son isolement, Abdullah Öcalan reste en effet une figure essentielle pour la rébellion kurde en Turquie, où le conflit entre l'État et le PKK a fait plus de 40 000 morts depuis 1984, mais aussi dans la région.

"RÔLE POSITIF" EN SYRIE



Leyla Güven refusait de s'alimenter depuis novembre dernier pour protester contre l'isolement imposé à Abdullah Öcalan.

Deux de ses avocats ont pu rendre visite à Abdullah Öcalan une première fois le 2 mai sur l'île-prison d'Imrali où il est détenu dans la mer de Marmara, puis une nouvelle fois mercredi après la levée formelle de l'interdiction la semaine dernière.

Selon Me Uysal, le leader kurde a souligné que la levée de l'interdiction de voir ses avocats ne signifiait pas pour autant le lancement d'un "processus de négociations" avec le gouvernement, comme celui entamé en 2013 mais qui s'est effondré en 2015.

Estimant que "la Turquie a fondamentalement besoin (...) de négociations démocratiques et d'une paix honorable", Abdullah Öcalan a dit que la réaction des autorités serait claire "dans 30 ou 40 jours", a poursuivi son avocate, sans plus de détails.

Lors de la visite de ses avocats le 2 mai, M. Öcalan avait également appelé à "prendre en considération" les "sensibilités" de la Turquie en Syrie, où une milice kurde syrienne liée au PKK contrôle de vastes territoires dans le nord du pays, au grand dam d'Ankara qui se dit déterminé à l'en chasser pour éviter la création d'une entité kurde à ses frontières.

Me Uysal a affirmé que lors de leur rencontre cette semaine, M. Öcalan a réitéré sa position sur le sujet et déclaré que "si l'opportunité lui est donnée, il jouerait un rôle positif" en Syrie.

L'autorisation accordée aux avocats de rendre visite à M. Öcalan survient également au moment où le parti au pouvoir, l'AKP, s'efforce de séduire les électeurs à Istanbul en vue de l'élection municipale prévue le 23 juin, après l'annulation du scrutin remporté par l'opposition fin mars.

Or de nombreux observateurs avaient estimé que le vote des Kurdes y avait été déterminant, le HDP ayant préféré soutenir le principal candidat de l'opposition, Ekrem Imamoglu, plutôt que de présenter son propre candidat.



Les députés de l'HDP Dersim Dag, Tayyip Temel et Murat Sarisac annonçaient hier l'arrêt de leur grève de la faim. Ilyas Akengin/AFP



May 23, 2019

Kurdish city returns to original name 'Dersim,' attracts Turkish ire

Rawa Barwari / May 23-2019 / www.kurdistan24.net

ERBIL (Kurdistan 24) – With a majority vote on Wednesday, the municipal council of the Kurdish city of Dersim decided to start using the original name “Dersim” on its signboards instead of the Turkish state-given name of “Tunceli.”

The decision given under Dersim’s new administration of Mayor Fatih Mehmet Macoglu from the Communist Party of Turkey led to an uproar from Turkish social media users and sharp criticism from far-right Turkish politicians, journalists, and even a famed punk rock vocalist.

In a press release on its website, the municipality justified its use of the name “Dersim” on the grounds of “preserving our city’s culture and history.”

In the same council meeting, Dersim’s elected officials also decided to carry out municipal affairs in the Kurdish languages of Zazaki and Kurmanji alongside Turkish.

What’s in a name?

Tunceli, which means “the Iron Hand” in Turkish, is the name Turkey’s founder Mustafa Kemal Ataturk gave Dersim after his administration’s 1938 military conquest to bring the then largely self-ruling region under its control, a campaign that subjected the local Alevi Kurdish population to massacres now referred mainly by the Kurds as a genocide and later Turkification.

“The Iron Hand” was initially the name of Ataturk’s military campaign targeting the region’s Kurds led by Seyiz Riza, a then 78-year-old political leader who Turkey executed by hanging. The operation claimed some 15,000 civilian lives and the forcible relocation of over 10,000 others deep into Turkish-speaking western regions of Turkey.

The “Commie” Mayor

Macoglu rose to national attention in Turkey in the past several years when he, as the mayor of Dersim’s Pulur district (Ovacik in Turkish), launched and successfully managed what he dubbed a socialist system of local governance with a particular emphasis on economic growth and agricultural development.

Devlet Bahçeli, an ally to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the leader of the government’s de facto partner Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), said in a press release that the use of the name Dersim was “void.”

“This decision is under our feet. The necessary response has to be given. There is no such province as Dersim in Turkey, and there will never ever be,” Bahçeli said.

Fatih Portakal, a top TV news presenter who has invited Macoglu multiple times on his show on one of the few left not pro-government television channels, the American-owned FOX TV’s Turkish franchise, was quick to denounce Macoglu’s initiative in reversing the name to Dersim.

“Is that it? What is the difference between Dersim and Tunceli? Another unnecessary issue to debate. Was that appropriate, Fatih Macoglu, amid all these problems? What a waste!!!” Portakal wrote on Twitter.

Turkish far-right’s fury

At the same time, thousands of Turkish social media users from across the country began using a hashtag “DersimDegilTunceli” which means “not Dersim but Tunceli,” condemning the 50,000 city’s council, sharing Ataturk’s pictures, Turkish flags, and pictures from the 1930’s campaign, or calling on the government to replace the elected mayor with a bureaucrat.

Yavuz Agiralioğlu, a deputy for the opposition far-right nationalist IYI



A general view of the Kurdish city of Dersim in Turkey. (Photo: Kurdistan 24 Turkish)



The city council of the Kurdish city of Dersim seen during a meeting, May 2019. (Photo: Dersim Municipality)

Party, said there was “no way we can tolerate such whims and defiance to the state.”

He threatened on Twitter that “the sympathy for [Macoglu’s municipal successes] can turn into rage.”

The Munzur mountains of Dersim which local Kurds of Alevi faith consider sacred, June 2015. (Photo: New York Times)

Gokhan Ozoguz, a punk rock singer and TV singing contest judge, who recently became politically vocal in support of the Republican Peoples’ Party-led (CHP) opposition’s bid for Istanbul’s local administration, slammed the Kurdish city’s decision.

“Personal, emotional decisions create chaos,” Ozoguz wrote. “Tunceli was approved in the law in 1935.”

The name Dersim was put on the municipal building in the previous administration of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) until a Turkish bureaucrat Erdogan’s government appointed by dismissing the elected officials in 2016 changed it back to “Tunceli.”

Silence on Erdogan’s side

As for Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), there was largely silence about Dersim, with their focus fixated on the redo of Istanbul elections next month in which nearly a million HDP votes swung a victory for the also IYI-backed CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu in the canceled March elections.

Earlier this month, Turkish authorities revoked the certificate of four members of Dersim’s city council who were elected in the recent March 31 local elections, on the grounds a decree by Erdogan’s office had dismissed them from their jobs at different public institutions, such as schools or universities. ♦

A deal for Iran: normalization for normalization



Bret Stephens

There has always been a fair and symmetrical formula for the United States and Iran to resolve the full range of their differences: full normalization for full normalization. Donald Trump, who may — but probably doesn't — want a war with the Islamic republic, should propose it, publicly and in detail, and see what happens.

It will be clarifying for everyone.

What is normalization? From the U.S. side, it would mean the immediate suspension of every economic and diplomatic sanction imposed by this or previous administrations. It would mean an American Embassy in Tehran and an Iranian one in Washington. It would mean direct flights between Iranian and American cities. It would mean two-way trade, direct investment, and the end of secondary sanctions that punish non-U.S. companies for doing business in Iran. It would mean tens of thousands of Iranian students once again enrolled in U.S. universities, and tens of thousands of American tourists once again exploring the grand bazaars of Iranian cities.

Iran's people could surely use that deal. Since Trump reimposed U.S. sanctions last year, Iran's oil exports have fallen by more than half, inflation has spiked to close to 40 percent and the rial has lost about 60 percent of its value against the dollar. Iran's economy is expected to contract by 6 percent this year. By some estimates, a third of all Iranians live in absolute, not relative, poverty, unable to afford the most basic staples of life.

As for the Iranian side, normalization would mean behaving like a normal country.

A normal country, with the world's fourth-largest proven oil reserves, is one that wouldn't need to embark on multiple underground programs to enrich uranium and produce plutonium. It wouldn't have engaged in extensive experimental work to figure out how to detonate a fissile nuclear core. It wouldn't have retained an illicit network to circumvent Western restrictions on the sale of dual-use tech-

The theocratic regime could not survive long if the Islamic republic acted like most nations.

nologies for its missile programs.

A normal country is one that would not perpetrate terrorist massacres in Argentina. It wouldn't seek to murder (via a Mexican drug cartel) the Saudi ambassador at a Washington, D.C., restaurant. It wouldn't attempt an assassination plot in Denmark, or a bombing attack in France.

A normal country would not furnish military, financial and logistical support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad, who seems to have resumed using chemical weapons against his enemies.

It wouldn't supply the Taliban with weapons, training and new recruits. It wouldn't provide its proxies in Yemen with ballistic missiles, especially now that those proxies are firing missiles at Mecca. It wouldn't be a principal sponsor for militias and terrorist groups throughout the Middle East.

It wouldn't constantly avow and seek, at considerable cost to itself, the destruction of another state with which it has neither a historical nor territorial conflict.

A normal country wouldn't hang gay people. It wouldn't imprison women in their own clothes. It wouldn't constantly arrest foreign nationals, including American journalists, on trumped-up charges as a means of gaining diplomatic or financial leverage.

In short, under the terms of a normalization-for-normalization deal, Iran could relieve itself of all U.S. pressure by permanently abandoning its nuclear ambitions, its human rights outrages and its reckless international behavior. That's not a big ask.

Or at least it shouldn't be, which is why Trump ought to deliver it in a carefully written speech — the kind normal presidents make about vital international and domestic topics. Mike Pompeo laid out roughly similar terms in his own speech on Iran a year ago, but his tone was more bellicose than beguiling. Trump prefers the combination of brash moves with simple messages. This would be it.

It would also be unlikely to win over Iran's leaders. Death to America — and to Israel — aren't propagandistic slogans for the regime. They are its reason for being and its motive for action. The regime's objections to the United States don't date to 1953 and U.S. connivance in the ouster of Mohammad Mosaddegh as prime minister of Iran (a coup the clerics supported at the time). They date to 1776 and the birth of political liberalism, the enemy of all theocratic and virtue-centric politics.

An American bombing campaign in Iran could hurt the regime. Complete and genuine normalization would, over time, be fatal to it. It would mean, as Trump put it the other day, Iran's "official end" — not as a nation, but as the regime that has tyrannized that nation for 40 years.

Last week's saber-rattling is unlikely to lead to a confrontation neither side wants. Trump thinks that avoiding war is crucial to his re-election. Tehran thinks Trump is more likely to be a one-termer if it can wait him out without a war. These are incompatible analyses, but they should induce mutual caution.

All the more reason for Trump to seize the initiative. Normalization for normalization is a concept this and future U.S. administrations could embrace. It's one ordinary Americans and Iranians alike could understand. And it's one Iran's leaders would fear. Let them be the ones to explain why Iranian children should go hungry so Hamas can aim its fire at Jews.



A mural of the Iranian revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Tehran.

Iran stiffens its resolve

BEIRUT, LEBANON

The U.S. has increased its pressure, but Tehran's behavior is unchanged

BY VIVIAN YEE

In its campaign to throttle Iran into submission, the Trump administration has in the last several weeks applied smothering force — blocking the country's last avenues for selling oil, classifying the elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps as a terrorist organization and deploying ships and bombers to the Persian Gulf.

But if the goal of increased pressure was to force Iran to change its behavior or to send angry Iranians into the streets to ultimately sweep the nation's clerical leadership from power, neither has so far been achieved.

Instead, the pressure appears to have only stiffened Iran's resolve, pushing it from wary patience to calibrated confrontation against an enemy it has long mistrusted. Its leaders, analysts say, are determined not to capitulate to what they view as economic and psychological warfare, or to negotiate under duress.

"Try respect," Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shot back at President Trump in a tweet on Monday. "It works!"

Trump administration officials defended their Iran strategy to Congress on Tuesday, laying out intelligence about Iranian threats that they said justified sending an aircraft carrier, bombers and missile defense systems to the region this month.

In the short term, at least, the administration's pressure tactics are leaving bite marks. With inflation running high and medicine, food and other basics running short, Iran's economy is tanking under the combined force of the sanctions and Iranian mismanagement, heightening public frustration.

But for Iranians, it is hard to view the American chokehold as anything but bullying from a foe that promised sanctions relief and a path back into the international community in exchange for limits on Iran's nuclear capabilities, only to go back on its word.

After months of quietly upholding its end of the 2015 nuclear bargain it struck with the United States and other world powers, Iran has begun to jettison parts of the agreement. It announced earlier this month that it would resume the production of nuclear centrifuges and begin



AMBER SMALLEY/U.S. NAVY

The United States sent an aircraft carrier, bombers and missile defense systems to the Persian Gulf region this month. One analyst said Iran believes it is under attack.

accumulating nuclear material.

Iran, its proxies or other allied groups are suspected of carrying out two recent attacks on Saudi oil tankers and pumping stations in the Persian Gulf and of a rocket attack near the American Embassy in Baghdad.

There is no hard evidence linking Iran to the attacks, which caused no casualties and only minor damage but may have been intended to send a message.

"They believe they're under attack, and their response is not to escalate to a conflict, but certainly not to back down," said Ariane Tabatabai, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation and an Iran researcher at Columbia University. "What they want to do is continue this current trend of doing everything they can to poke the U.S. in the eye, without getting to the threshold of an all-out war."

Targeting a crucial oil shipping route would serve as a pointed reminder that Iran is capable of striking American allies and disrupting the world's economy, even if it cannot fight the United States



POOL PHOTO BY EUGENE HOSHIKO

Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told President Trump to "try respect."

military head to head.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has three decades of experience goading the United States with asymmetric tactics and, matador-like, narrowly escaping injury, as when Iranian-linked Shiite militias in Iraq waged guerrilla warfare on American troops in the mid-2000s.

"I think his dilemma is always that, if he does nothing to counter U.S. pressure, he risks losing face, and if he excessively counters U.S. pressure, he risks losing his head," said Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "He's comfortable operating in the space between those two."

Calibrated provocations also give Iran's leaders a means of showing the public that they are standing up to the United States, Ms. Tabatabai said.

Both sides appeared to swerve away from conflict last week when both Mr. Trump and Ayatollah Khamenei made statements saying they did not want a war. But just as tensions seemed to simmer down, Mr. Trump tweeted Monday, "If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran. Never threaten the United States again!"

What provoked the outburst was unclear, but Mr. Zarif, the foreign minister, responded with a hashtag: #NeverThreatenAnIranian. Iranian officials have repeatedly warned that Iran will retaliate if attacked.

The following day, Mr. Trump again raised the prospect of talks, but put the onus on Iran to reach out. "Iran will call us if and when they are ever ready," he tweeted.

But for Iran, negotiations can happen

only if the “sanctions, insulting and bullying” stop, said Diako Hosseini, an analyst at Tehran’s Center for Strategic Studies, which is affiliated with Iran’s presidential office. “Otherwise it is impossible that Iran surrender.”

“It was the U.S. that pulled back from the negotiation table, not Iran,” he added. “Iranians don’t believe in Trump’s sincerity.”

Iranian leaders who supported dialogue, like President Hassan Rouhani, have been sidelined by Mr. Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal. On Wednesday, Ayatollah Khamenei openly criticized Mr. Rouhani and Mr. Zarif, saying that he had “warned them several times” that he “did not really believe in” the way they handled the nuclear agreement, the official IRNA news agency reported. Ayatollah Khamenei has compared negotiating with the United States to “drinking poison.”

“The parts of the government that wanted to engage with America have been proven wrong and are not going to have an opportunity to engage anytime soon,” said Narges Bajoghli, an assistant professor at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies who frequently speaks with people in hard-line Iranian circles.

Iranian officials have tried to drive a wedge between President Trump, who has frequently expressed the desire to disentangle the United States from the Middle East, and his foreign policy team, which takes a harder line. National Security Adviser John Bolton has long advocated regime change, while Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has also appeared to endorse it.

Iranian leaders have singled out Mr. Bolton as a warmonger who is getting ahead of his boss.

“Bolton May Be Sacked,” read a recent headline in Javan, a hard-line Iranian newspaper, referring to American reports that Mr. Trump was not pleased with Mr. Bolton. “Infighting in Washington,” echoed Arman-e Emrooz, a more moderate paper in Iran.

Analysts said the Iranians may have been hoping to lie low until the 2020 American presidential election, when a friendlier administration might gain power.

They were thinking, “maybe we can wait this guy out,” said Dina Esfandiary, a Century Foundation fellow who focuses on Iran. Most of the Democratic presidential candidates support rejoining the nuclear deal.

But there are no guarantees that a Democrat will win or that a new president would automatically embrace the deal without new demands.

While Iranian officials may be able to rely on rainy-day funds, oil smuggling and trade with friendly countries until the end of 2020, they are not likely to carry it through 2024, analysts said.

The 2015 nuclear deal, which offered Iranians a breather from crippling American sanctions, never led to the widespread economic improvements Iranians were eager for.

Over the last year and a half, the government has faced widespread criticism and protests from Iranians over its mismanagement of the economy, its corruption and its foreign activities, among other issues.

Many Iranians question why the gov-

ernment is spending so much on proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq when it has struggled to handle floods in Iran that caused billions in damage this year or to protect the public from the impact of economic sanctions.

But nationalism has spiked, now that Iran seems under threat. Hard-line factions within the Iranian government appear confident that the United States will ultimately not want to get bogged down in an invasion of Iran, and, moreover, that Iran would win.

It is difficult to gauge public opinion in Iran.

But analysts who speak to people there said that some seem fed up with their leaders, while others blame the United States for their troubles.

Most Iranians, they believe, want to avoid violent confrontation, either with the United States or with their own government.

Ten years after the government violently crushed the pro-democracy protests known as the Green Revolution, even discontented Iranians have little appetite for a popular revolt. And three decades after their devastating war with Iraq, Iranians hope to avoid another international conflict.

The tensions with the United States worry many Iranians.

“When I sleep, I dream of war,” Tina Kheiri, a 24-year-old Tehran resident, said in an interview. When she wakes up, she checks Twitter to see if anything has happened.

Nilo Tabrizy contributed reporting.



VOICE OF AMERICA

MAY 25, 2019

Sources: Turkey Arms Syrian Rebels Facing Russian-Backed Assault

May 25, 2019 - AMMAN, JORDAN - Reuters
<https://www.voanews.com>

Turkey has equipped an array of mainstream Syrian rebels it backs with fresh supplies of weaponry to help them try to repel a major Russian-backed assault, senior opposition officials and rebel sources said.

Russia is backing the Syrian army’s large aerial and ground assault as it seeks to gain control of the last big stretch of rebel-held territory in the northwest of the country.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad launched the assault last month, saying rebels had breached an existing cease-fire, triggering a civilian exodus by bombarding Idlib and adjacent areas. It has been the biggest escalation since last summer between Assad and his enemies in Idlib province and a belt of territory around it.

Ankara stepped up supplies in recent days after failing to persuade Russia in recent meetings of a joint working group to end its escalat-



FILE - Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army fighters prepare a TOW anti-tank missile north of Afrin, Syria, Feb. 18, 2018.

tion to avert a major influx of refugees pouring into Turkey, two senior opposition figures said.

In doing so, Turkey signaled its readiness to

preserve its influence in northwestern Syria, where it has beefed up its troop presence in a dozen military bases that were set up under a de-escalation deal with Russia, a senior rebel commander said.

Turkish officials were not immediately available to comment.

TURKISH CONVOY

Overnight, a Turkish military convoy arrived at a base in northern Hama near rebel-held Jabal al-Zawiya, an area Russian and Syrian jets have been pounding for weeks, a rebel and a witness said.

The delivery of dozens of armored vehicles, Grad rocket launchers, anti-tank guided missiles and TOW missiles helped roll back some Syrian army gains and retake the strategically located town of Kfar Nabouda, one senior opposition figure said.

The TOW missile had been the most potent weapon in the arsenal of rebel groups battling →

⇒ Assad during the conflict. It was extended by Western and Arab foes of Assad until a CIA-led program of military support to help moderate rebels was suspended in 2017.

A Western intelligence source said Washington had given a "green light" for the Turkey-backed mainstream rebels to use the TOW missiles, which had been in storage in the latest campaign.

Washington, which has criticized Russia's latest campaign and urged a cease-fire, also said it saw signs that Assad had used poison gas in the latest offensive and warned that it would respond "quickly and appropriately" if this were proven.

Assad has denied such allegations throu-

ghout the war.

A spokesman for the Turkey-backed National Liberation Front (NLF), Capt. Naji Mustafa, did not confirm or deny any new supplies by Turkey, saying rebels had long had a big arsenal of weapons from anti-tank to armored vehicles "alongside material and logistical support by our Turkish brothers."

The retreat from Kfar Nabouda was an upset to a Russian goal of a speedy military campaign to gain another slice of heavily populated Idlib province.

NEW FRONT

In the last 24 hours, the Syrian army has been sending large troop reinforcements ahead of opening a new front, a source in touch with

Syrian army commanders told Reuters.

The Syrian army said Saturday that it continued to intensify its attacks on what it called terrorist hideouts in the northwest.

A Turkey backed-rebel grouping called the National Army, which operates in northwestern border areas near Turkey, has been allowed to join mainstream rebel factions along the front lines.

"Large numbers of our fighters have joined with all their weapons to repel the assault," said Maj. Youssef Hamoud, their spokesman.

The rebels' readiness to put aside differences that once led to bloody internecine fighting has united jihadists and mainstream rebels for the first time in years. ●

Kurdish hunger strikers wait for news from meeting of jailed leader

Imprisoned Kurdistan Workers Party leader Abdullah Ocalan has met for a second time with lawyers as a wide Kurdish hunger strike endangers lives.



Amberin Zaman
May 22, 2019
www.al-monitor.com

Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), was granted access to his lawyers today in the first such meeting since May 2 and the second in eight years, amid signs that Ankara is easing his isolation.

Lawyers Nevroz Uysal and Rezan Sarica returned from the island prison of Imrali, where Ocalan has been held since 1999, following his treason conviction.

But Ibrahim Bilmez, a member of Ocalan's vast legal team, said what had been discussed is still under wraps. "It may take one or two days for us to share this information," Bilmez told Al-Monitor.

The government's decision to end Ocalan's communications embargo has sparked widespread debate about its possible motives. One is that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is seeking to woo back Kurds who voted in favor of the opposition in the March 31 local elections, helping it grab many of Turkey's largest cities, including Istanbul. A do-over election for Istanbul is to be held on June 23, after the country's top electoral commission upheld the AKP's claims of irregularities. Around two million of Istanbul's 15 million-strong population are believed to be Kurds.

The controversial decision was announced on May 6. The same day, his lawyers shared a message Ocalan composed during the May 2 meeting. He made no mention of the elections.

Instead, Ocalan appealed to more than 3,000 hunger strikers protesting his internment conditions to not endanger their lives. But the strikes continue and "the situation is getting critical," said Bilmez. "My personal opinion is that the government is above all concerned with getting our client to use his influence to help end the strikes." Should they result in death, Bilmez warned, it would fuel nationwide unrest and add to instability as the country grapples with its worst financial crisis in recent years.

Leyla Guven, a lawmaker for the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party who spearheaded the hunger strikes, is on her 196th day of refusing solid food.

Some 30 Ocalan supporters are refusing all forms of nutrition and medical intervention until their conditions are met. Over time, such actions can trigger Wernicke Korsakoff syndrome, a brain disorder that is caused by a vitamin B1 deficiency and leads to a painful death.

The PKK has signaled that the hunger strikes will continue until Ocalan's isolation is terminated and he is granted free and unfettered access to his family and lawyers. It could be seen as a display of loyalty in which the organization persists in advocating sacrifice despite his appeals. But it could also be the PKK's way of messaging Ankara that it won't cooperate



Leyla Guven, a lawmaker from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) who has been on a hunger strike, rests in her bed at her home in Diyarbakir, Turkey, March 20, 2019. Reuters/Umit Bektas

unless it shows real signs of wanting to resume peace talks to end the 35-year-old Kurdish conflict.

Ocalan's message also addressed Syria, where the PKK's sister organization the People's Protection Units (YPG) dominates around a third of the war-ravaged country with military protection from the United States.

Ocalan did not refer to the YPG specifically but instead called on the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters, to take "Turkey's sensitivities into account" and to steer clear from "a culture of conflict." His words were interpreted by some as a signal to the YPG to be more yielding as the United States pursues efforts to secure agreement between Turkey and the Kurdish militants on a proposed safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Turkey has not backed down from demands that its forces monitor the zone that would stretch east of the Euphrates River on the Syrian side all the way to the Iraqi border. The United States' special envoy to Syria, Jim Jeffrey, is said to be continuing to pile pressure on the YPG to make further concessions "to stop the process from stalling," a source familiar with the substance of the talks told Al-Monitor on condition of anonymity. Whether further exhortations from Ocalan will soften the YPG's opposition to a Turkish presence remains to be seen.

Typically, the government vets any statements made by the 71-year-old guerrilla boss before they are made public, and at least one government official — from the national intelligence agency or the armed forces — is present when Ocalan meets with visitors. ◆

Amberin Zaman is a senior correspondent reporting from the Middle East, North Africa and Europe exclusively for Al-Monitor.



La Turquie dans la tourmente économique

Le 23 juin les électeurs sont appelés à voter à nouveau pour élire le maire d'Istanbul, après que la victoire de l'opposition a été invalidée. La détérioration de la situation économique de la Turquie risque de peser lourd sur le résultat.



Levent, le quartier des affaires d'Istanbul.

». Elle a même indigné des vétérans de l'AKP comme Abdullah Gül, ancien président ou Ahmet Davutoğlu, ex-premier ministre. Fait sans précédent, ils se sont désolidarisés de leur ancien patron.

Mais Erdoğan ne peut pas perdre le 23 juin prochain. Istanbul, la grande place du business turc, pèse un tiers du PIB, sans doute plus encore dans les finances de l'AKP et de ses affairistes, et ce serait un aveu de faiblesse insupportable pour un homme qui se prétend fort à l'image des sultans ottomans de la glorieuse époque de l'empire comme Soliman le Magnifique. Il mettra donc les moyens qu'il faut pour convaincre les électeurs, fort de son contrôle exclusif sur les ressources de l'État et de ses millions de fonctionnaires, quitte à violer une fois de plus « la règle universelle de la loi et des pratiques établies » pour reprendre les mots de Davutoğlu. Les arrestations récentes d'universitaires et les attaques contre des journalistes montrent qu'il y est prêt.

Encore faut-il que l'intendance suive. Pour le moment, ce n'est pas le cas. La croissance est négative (-3 %). Entraînée par la chute de la livre, l'inflation fait rage : +20 % en un an au mois de mars, mais +30 % pour les produits alimentaires, une charge insupportable pour les budgets des ménages modestes où se recrute une part importante des électeurs de l'AKP. Istanbul, mais aussi Ankara la capitale et d'autres grandes villes l'ont sanctionné, avec des écarts encore plus importants que ceux du Bosphore. En un an, le chômage est passé de 10,8 % à 14,7 % de la population active, soit près de 5 millions de sans-emploi.

UNE BANQUE CENTRALE SOUS PRESSION

La réussite de l'opération sauvetage est entre les mains de la Banque centrale de Turquie (BCT) fondée dans les années 1930 par Mustafa Kemal Atatürk et qui est, normalement, indépendante depuis 2001. Mais les temps ne sont pas normaux, et la main d'Erdoğan et celle de son genre ministre des finances Berat Albayrak ont pesé lourd sur son malheureux gouverneur. Les occasions n'ont pas manqué : pas moins de sept élections ont eu lieu en cinq ans. ■

Jean-Pierre Sereni / 27 mai 2019
<https://orientxxi.info>

Le principal opposant au président Recep Tayyip Erdoğan n'est plus politique, mais financier. Sa devise nationale la livre dégringole plus que jamais. Après au moins 30 % de baisse l'année dernière, déjà 10 % pour les quatre premiers mois de 2019 dont une chute de 15 % contre le dollar américain. Le toboggan monétaire engloutit rapidement les réserves officielles de change détenues à la Banque centrale de Turquie. Jeudi 9 mai, celle-ci a dépensé plus d'un milliard de dollars pour soutenir sa monnaie en rachetant près de 6 milliards de dollars pour rien. La devise nationale est quand même passée sous la barre symbolique des 6 livres pour un dollar. Dans la semaine qui a suivi l'annulation de l'élection du maire d'Istanbul le 6 mai, plus de 4 milliards de dollars ont été ainsi sacrifiés inutilement à la défense de la monnaie.

FRONDE DANS L'AKP

À ce rythme, combien de temps la Banque centrale peut-elle tenir ? Officiellement ses réserves de change sont d'environ 30 milliards de dollars. La saignée de la deuxième semaine de mai lui en a déjà coûté 14 %. À ce rythme, il n'est pas dit que la Turquie pourra tenir jusqu'au 23 juin prochain, date fixée par la commission électorale qui a annulé l'élection d'Ekrem İmamoğlu, le premier opposant élu maire d'Istanbul depuis un bon quart de siècle. L'annonce — également une première — a été accueillie dans plusieurs quartiers de la ville par un concert de casseroles retentissant et des manifestations de rue. La décision, choquante, annule l'élection du maire pour cause de nominations « inappropriées » de scrutateurs, mais pas celles des conseillers locaux ou des maires de districts remportés en majorité par le Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) d'Erdoğan et, pourtant, dépouillées par les mêmes « inappropriés



Erdogan reçoit le président irakien alors qu'Ankara a lancé une offensive contre les Kurdes

Istanbul, 28 mai 2019 (AFP)

LE PRÉSIDENT TURC Recep Tayyip Erdogan a rencontré mardi à Istanbul son homologue irakien Barham Saleh, alors que l'armée turque a lancé une opération contre les Kurdes dans le nord de l'Irak.

Les deux dirigeants se sont entretenus avant de participer ensemble à un dîner et terrestre dans une région montagneuse du nord de l'Irak contre des cachettes du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), qualifié d'"organisation terroriste" par Ankara, mais aussi par les États-Unis et l'Union européenne.

Cette visite intervient alors que l'armée turque a lancé une offensive aérienne et terrestre dans une région montagneuse du nord de l'Irak contre des cachettes du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK), qualifié d'"organisation terroriste" par Ankara, mais aussi par les États-Unis et l'Union européenne. Des forces spéciales et des drones sont aussi impliqués dans cette offensive qui a débuté lundi, a indiqué le ministère turc de la Défense dans un commu-

niqué. Cette opération militaire vise à détruire "des grottes et des abris utilisés par des groupes terroristes".

Le sanglant conflit entre la Turquie et la rébellion du PKK (d'obédience marxiste-léniniste) a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis son déclenchement en 1984.

Surtout actif dans le sud-est majoritairement kurde de la Turquie, le PKK a également des bases arrière dans les zones montagneuses du nord de l'Irak qui sont régulièrement bombardées par l'aviation turque.

La Turquie et le PKK s'affrontent violemment depuis la fin d'un fragile cessez-le-feu en 1984. Le conflit entre l'État turc et le PKK a fait plus de 40.000 morts depuis 1984.

Deux avocats du chef historique de la rébellion kurde Abdullah Öcalan, emprisonné en Turquie depuis 1999, ont pu se rendre le 22 mai sur l'île-prison près d'Istanbul où il est détenu, pour la première fois depuis la levée ce mois-ci d'une interdiction à cet effet. ●

Syrie : le jeu ambigu des Russes et des Turcs à Idlib

Des combats au sol et des raids aériens contre la dernière poche rebelle du pays ont fait des dizaines de morts

BEYROUTH, ISTANBUL -
correspondants

Le drame était annoncé : la guerre happe de nouveau le nord-ouest de la Syrie, et dans le désastre à l'œuvre, les civils paient le prix fort. L'escalade militaire en cours rappelle l'ambiguïté des rôles de Moscou et Ankara, « parrains » chargés de veiller à l'atténuation des hostilités autant qu'acteurs du conflit. Ces deux puissances étrangères, principalement, détiennent les clefs pour décider de la destinée de la zone d'Idlib et de ses alentours, l'ultime grande poche insurgée en Syrie, en imposant un nouveau statu quo ou en poursuivant l'engrenage de la violence.

Aux frappes aériennes lancées fin avril par Moscou et Damas sur la province d'Idlib se sont ajoutés les combats au sol entre forces progouvernementales et combattants anti-Assad, avec de lourdes pertes humaines. Le front reste limité : il se concentre dans le nord-ouest de la région de Hama, contiguë à celle d'Idlib. Signe de l'importance de leurs moyens militaires et de leur détermination, les djihadistes de Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (HTS) et les rebelles pro-turcs de l'alliance du Front national de libération (FNL) ont lancé une contre-offensive, face aux

Le régime n'a jamais arrêté les raids aériens depuis l'automne 2018, et les djihadistes n'ont pas quitté la zone destinée à être démilitarisée

avancées des forces prorégime. Moscou et Damas ont intensifié, dans la foulée, les raids aériens contre le sud de la province d'Idlib, menés par dizaines jeudi 23 mai, en fauchant des vies civiles.

La bataille au sol se livre dans la bande de terre qui devait tenir lieu de zone « démilitarisée », entre les territoires sous contrôle du pouvoir et ceux tenus par l'insurrection, selon l'accord de Sotchi. Scellé par Moscou et Ankara en septembre 2018, celui-ci avait pour ambition de geler les fronts dans la province d'Idlib et ses alentours. Mais, fin avril, le statu quo a volé en éclats, comme un rappel que le fragile accord a été négocié entre des acteurs russes et turcs aux intérêts divergents et aux relations fluctuantes.

Pression mutuelle

Pendant des mois, les nombreux



A Idlib (Syrie), le 24 mai. KHALIL ASHAWI/REUTERS

accros à cette entente avaient été contenus. Jusqu'à ce que, en avril, chaque camp s'accuse mutuellement de « provocations ». En violation des termes du texte, les raids aériens du régime n'ont jamais cessé depuis l'automne 2018, et les combattants djihadistes n'ont pas quitté la zone destinée à être démilitarisée. Ankara, qui détient 12 postes militaires d'observation, a failli à endiguer les djihadistes de HTS. Au contraire, le groupe, émanation d'Al-Qaïda, a renforcé son emprise sur la province d'Idlib, qui borde la Turquie.

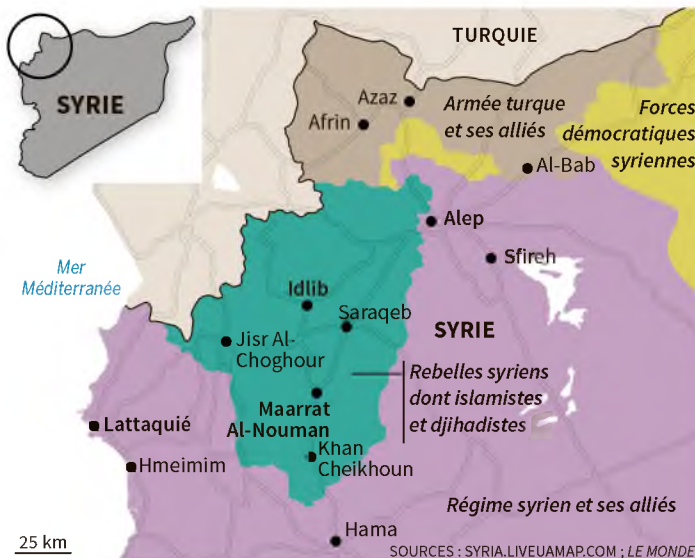
C'est en s'opposant une pression mutuelle sur le champ de bataille du nord-ouest syrien que les deux puissances influentes, liées par la décision d'Ankara de se doter des systèmes antimissiles russes S-400, au grand dam de Washington, semblent tenter de définir les nouvelles règles du jeu. Selon Alexandre Choumiline, directeur du Centre d'études sur l'Europe et le Moyen-Orient de l'Académie des sciences de Russie, interrogé par *Le Monde* lors d'une conférence organisée à Istanbul le 15 mai, l'offensive actuelle atteste du « mécontentement russe » face à la non mise en œuvre par Ankara de l'accord de Sotchi.

L'un des objectifs, pour le camp progouvernemental, est de repousser les combattants anti-Assad à l'écart de la ligne de front. La Russie a « deux buts principaux : d'abord, mettre à l'abri les villages du nord de la province de Hama des

fréquentes attaques lancées par les rebelles basés à Idlib, estime Abdullah Al-Jabassini, chercheur associé à l'Institut universitaire européen de Florence. Ensuite, sécuriser l'aéroport de Hmeimim [la principale base militaire russe en Syrie] des attaques récurrentes, par des drones ou des missiles, menées par des groupes rebelles à partir de Jisr Al-Choughour [proche de la province de Lattaquié, où se trouve Hmeimim] : ces attaques-là constituent le principal problème entre la Turquie et la Russie ».

D'abord silencieuse au début de l'escalade, la Turquie a haussé le ton. En se gardant de viser Moscou, le président, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a dénoncé, mi-mai, lors d'un échange avec son homologue russe, Vladimir Poutine, les attaques contre « des civils, des écoles et des hôpitaux ». En trois semaines, les frappes aériennes, qui ont pulvérisé des infrastructures civiles et fait des dizaines de morts, ont poussé près de la frontière, fermée à double tour par Ankara, près de 200 000 déplacés. La Turquie redoute un afflux supplémentaire de réfugiés syriens vers son territoire, en cas d'offensive totale.

Mardi, le ministre turc de la défense, Hulusi Akar, a accusé le régime syrien de faire « tout ce qui est en son pouvoir pour briser le statu quo » instauré par l'accord de septembre, « notamment en utilisant des barils d'explosifs, et (en menant) une offensive terres-



tre et aérienne ».

Probable décision turque

Ankara n'est pas non plus restée les bras croisés : le déploiement de plusieurs groupes proturcs sur le front témoigne d'une probable décision turque. « Les messages que nous envoyent les Turcs sont clairs. Ils nous disent qu'Idlib est notre terre, qu'il est de notre devoir de la défendre, affirme ainsi Fateh Hassoun, commandant d'un groupe au sein de l'alliance du FNL. De nombreux combattants originai-

res de cette région, qui étaient réfugiés plus au nord, ont rejoint la ligne de front. Au début, HTS [avec lequel plusieurs des groupes du FNL ont été en conflit] leur a bloqué la route, mais finalement, il a accepté de les laisser passer. »

Les Turcs ont aussi « récemment fait rentrer des renforts » vers leurs postes d'observation, indique Sinan Hatahet, analyste proche de l'opposition. Selon lui, Ankara « s'accroche à Astana », ce processus lancé en 2017 par la Russie,

l'Iran et la Turquie, qui veulent en faire la voie du règlement du conflit syrien, à leurs conditions.

Mais sur le terrain d'Idlib, les Russes disposent de plus de cartes que les Turcs, qu'ils doivent toutefois se garder de trop mécontenter. Moscou ne fera une offre de cessez-le-feu que « s'il s'estime suffisamment satisfait de ses gains militaires et territoriaux », juge le chercheur syrien Abdullah Al-Jabassini. « La Turquie l'acceptera probablement, et les groupes

rebelles, malgré leurs pertes, devront s'y tenir », étant donné leur dépendance à la Turquie. Tandis que la communication se poursuit entre les deux « parrains », près de trois millions de civils dans la zone d'Idlib redoutent l'extension des frappes meurtrières et de la crise humanitaire. ■

BENJAMIN BARTHE,

MARIE JÉGO ET LAURE STEPHAN

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OPINIONS

AFFAIRES ÉTRANGÈRES, PAR

CHRISTIAN MAKARIAN

ERDOGAN ENTRE LES GRIFFES DE POUTINE



Le président turc pensait conserver en Syrie une zone d'influence qui lui aurait permis de négocier avec les Russes et les Iraniens. Il n'en sera rien. Avec une logique imperturbable, les troupes de Bachar el-Assad, appuyées par l'aviation russe, ont repris les hostilités dans la poche d'Idlib, le dernier des bastions djihadistes. Située au nord-ouest de la Syrie, le long de la province turque du Hatay, cette enclave fournit une ultime illustration de l'absurdité inextricable du conflit syrien, puisque le combat met aux prises des djihadistes qui n'ont plus rien à perdre et des troupes que rien n'arrête, le tout sous le regard de puissances occidentales sorties du jeu.

Cette fois, l'enjeu vise à éliminer définitivement la résistance acharnée du groupe Hayat Tahrir Al-Cham (Organisation de libération du Levant), dernière dénomination adoptée par l'ex-Front al-Nosra, faction terroriste redoutable qui s'est fait connaître comme la branche syrienne d'Al-Qaeda. Depuis le début de la guerre syrienne, ce sont sans doute ces combattants-là qui ont donné le plus de fil à retordre aux soldats de

Les espoirs du président turc en Syrie se trouvent anéantis

Dès les origines du Front al-Nosra, la Turquie d'Erdogan a vu dans cette mouvance le fer de lance de la lutte armée contre Assad et lui a apporté un soutien décisif; le Qatar s'est également associé à Ankara. Avec l'extension fulgurante du groupe Etat islamique (EI), à partir de 2014, Al-Nosra a clairement marqué ses divergences avec ce califat qui poursuivait de tout autres buts que la chute d'Assad. Après quoi, c'est d'Al-Qaeda que le Front Al-Nosra a tenu à se différencier, en 2016, poussé par la Turquie qui s'est soudain sentie obligée, sous la pression des Etats-Unis, de donner des gages en matière de lutte antiterroriste, pendant que

les Occidentaux faisaient des Kurdes de Syrie leurs nouveaux alliés pour combattre l'EI.

Et maintenant ? A Idlib, on compte près de 3 millions d'habitants pris en otages par les djihadistes, lesquels seraient entre 30 000 et 50 000 à exercer la terreur sur cette nasse. Reprendre ce nid de terroristes est crucial aux yeux du régime syrien, car c'est par cette région que passent deux autoroutes essentielles – l'axe nord-sud Damas-Alep et la voie ouest-est Lattaquié-Alep. En outre, le contrôle d'Idlib commande l'accès au pays alaouite voisin, d'où est originaire le clan Assad. Liquider les djihadistes provoquera un exode humain massif qui, forcément, se dirigera vers la Turquie, où ont déjà trouvé refuge 3,5 millions de déracinés syriens. Voilà qui est inacceptable pour Erdogan. Mais son échec à Idlib est patent et fait piaffer d'impatience ses deux alliés de circonstance que sont la Russie et l'Iran, pressés de voir Assad en finir avec cet abscès.

En mai 2017, à Astana, le président turc s'était en effet engagé à maîtriser les terroristes d'Idlib ; or il n'y est pas du tout parvenu, ces derniers n'ayant cessé de harceler l'armée syrienne et de viser la base aérienne russe de Hmeimim. Sous la pression accrue de Vladimir Poutine et de Hassan Rohani, le président iranien, voici donc Erdogan contraint de lâcher les djihadistes d'Idlib en marchandant en compensation une zone d'influence dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie, afin de démanteler les positions des Kurdes.

A court ou à moyen terme, les espoirs de Recep Tayyip Erdogan en Syrie se trouvent anéantis. En échange de son rapprochement avec Vladimir Poutine et en contrepartie de son engagement à soutenir la levée des soutiens américains contre Téhéran, le président turc a beaucoup reçu : une amplification des échanges avec la Russie, le gazoduc russe Turk Stream, l'achat du système antimissile S-400 et sa fabrication en Turquie (livraison prévue en juillet prochain)... Mais il y a un prix à payer à la clef. Autant dire qu'Erdogan s'est mis entre les griffes de Poutine.

Christian Makarian est directeur de la rédaction délégué à L'Express et éditorialiste.

En Syrie, l'assaut contre le bastion rebelle d'Idlib s'intensifie

Les bombardements russes et syriens ont récemment chassé 180 000 personnes de cette ville contrôlée par les djihadistes.

DELPHINE MINOUI @DelphineMinoui
CORRESPONDANTE À ISTANBUL

MOYEN-ORIENT « C'est un holocauste. C'est un génocide. Horrible. Terrible. Si cela ne vous touche pas, qu'advient-il ? Ces gens ne sont pas des fossiles. Ils sont vrais. C'est arrivé aujourd'hui, après le bombardement par Assad du village d'Ihsem à Idlib... » Il y a d'abord les mots, hachés d'émotion. Et puis les images : une minivideo d'à peine 30 secondes où les corps éteints de jeunes enfants étreignent une ruelle dévastée par un nouveau déluge de feu russo-syrien. Un goût amer de déjà-vu qu'Abdulfaki Alhamdo aurait préféré ne jamais partager sur Twitter ce mardi 28 mai. Mais le jeune professeur d'anglais syrien, témoin en 2011 des premières heures de la révolution, rescapé des bombardements d'Alep-Est et réfugié dans la province d'Idlib depuis plus de deux ans, veut raconter en direct la sinistre routine de la guerre - « pour qu'on ne nous oublie pas ! », insiste-t-il.

Voilà maintenant plus d'un mois qu'Idlib, dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie, subit des bombardements répétés et des tirs d'artillerie du régime syrien et de son allié russe sur des positions à la fois militaires et civiles. Dans ce dernier grand fief rebelle, qui compte plus de 3 millions d'habitants - dont de nombreux déplacés d'Alep, de Homs, de la banlieue de Damas -, les derniers résistants pacifiques et combattants modérés faisaient déjà l'objet d'une pression renforcée de la part de Hayat Tahrir al-Cham (HTC), l'ex-branche syrienne d'al-Qaïda, qui impose son hégémonie sur la région depuis le mois de janvier. Avec cette nouvelle menace venant du ciel, ils se retrouvent plus que jamais pris en étau entre Damas et les djihadistes. Selon l'Observatoire syrien des droits de l'homme (OSDH), l'offensive russo-syrienne aurait fait plus de

771 morts, dont 230 civils, depuis le 30 avril dernier. Comme ce fut précédemment le cas dans d'autres provinces rebelles, les hôpitaux et établissements scolaires sont délibérément visés. D'après l'ONU, les bombardements ont déjà touché 20 structures médicales, 17 écoles et 3 camps de déplacés.

Les marchés ne sont pas épargnés : mardi 21 mai, des missiles ont touché celui de Maarat al-Numan, après l'iftar, le repas de rupture du jeûne musulman, causant la mort d'une dizaine de personnes. « Et quand bien même nous survivons aux bombes, nous savons qu'on risque de finir par mourir de faim », alerte Noura, une mère de famille contactée par WhatsApp. La pénurie alimentaire provoque une flambée des prix sans précédent. « Les gens sur place nous disent que la nourriture constitue leur premier besoin, mais les prix des denrées ont augmenté jusqu'à 45 % durant le mois de ramadan », observe

« Quand bien même nous survivons aux bombes, nous savons qu'on risque de finir par mourir de faim »

NOURA, MÈRE DE FAMILLE SYRIENNE

Made Ferguson, de l'ONG Mercy Corps. En l'espace d'un mois, la violence et la faim ont jeté sur la route quelque 180 000 personnes qui fuient vers le Nord, aux abords de la frontière turque. « Tout l'enjeu aujourd'hui est que l'on ne parvienne pas à un accord politique qui permettrait réellement de traiter la question d'Idlib. Il faut à la fois un plan militaire très complexe, mais il existe beaucoup de Syriens qui ont travaillé à ce plan, et il faut savoir que la population elle-même veut se débarrasser des djihadistes », prévenait il y a quelques jours Bassma Kodmani, directrice de l'Arab



Bombardement russo-syrien sur le village de Khan Assubul, mardi au sud d'Idlib. REUTERS TV

Reform Initiative, sur l'antenne de France Culture.

La zone du sud d'Idlib, où se livrent actuellement des combats acharnés entre forces loyalistes et groupes rebelles, faisait, depuis septembre 2018, partie d'un accord dit « de désescalade » scellé entre Moscou, soutien indéfectible de Damas, et Ankara, qui parraine certains groupes rebelles. Ce « deal » était censé séparer les territoires insurgés des zones gouvernementales et éviter une offensive du régime. Après avoir été fragilisé par différentes violations de part et d'autre, il a fini par voler en éclats, début 2019, lors du passage de la région sous contrôle de HTC. Damas et Moscou reprochent à la Turquie son ambiguïté face aux combattants djihadistes. Pour sa part, la Turquie estime que Moscou n'y met pas suffisamment du sien pour dissuader Damas de bombarder des positions civiles.

Faute de parvenir à une nouvelle trêve, la course aux armes a repris de plus belle en fin de semaine dernière. Selon l'agence Reuters, la Turquie aurait en effet livré des armes à certaines factions rebelles, après avoir échoué à convaincre la Russie d'intervenir pour mettre fin à l'offensive. Cette livraison, qui comprend des véhicules blindés et des missiles TOW, aurait été rendue possible grâce à un « feu vert » de Washington, précise l'agence de presse britannique, qui cite une source occidentale travaillant pour les renseignements. Les États-Unis, qui avaient fait le choix de se désengager du conflit syrien, entendent néanmoins signifier leur inquiétude face à la nouvelle campagne russo-syrienne. Le département d'État américain, qui a récemment évoqué une « attaque présumée au chlore dans le nord-ouest de la Syrie au matin du 19 mai », craint le franchissement d'une nouvelle « ligne rouge » par Bachar el-Assad.

Ce mardi, Jean-Yves Le Drian, le ministre des Affaires étrangères, s'est à son tour saisi du sujet en faisant savoir que la France disposait d'un « indice » sur l'emploi de ces armes prohibées. « Mais cela fait huit ans que dure cette guerre. Et tant que Damas ne sera pas sanctionné, les civils continueront à en payer le prix fort », déplore Noura, la mère de famille. ■

La démocratie turque balayée par la dérive autoritaire d'Erdogan

L'annulation récente des résultats électoraux à Istanbul, tout comme les attaques physiques contre des journalistes et les arrestations de professeurs d'université, suscite l'inquiétude.



Le président turc, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, prononce un discours, mercredi, à Istanbul, lors du 565^e anniversaire de la conquête de la ville par le Sultan Mehmet II.

HANDOUT/REUTERS

DELPHINE MINOUI [@DelphineMinoui](#)
CORRESPONDANTE À ISTANBUL

« LA DÉMOCRATIE, c'est comme un tramway. Une fois arrivé au terminus, on en descend. » La petite phrase de Recep Tayyip Erdogan, prononcée il y a plus de vingt ans, trouve une résonance particulièrement glaçante dans la Turquie d'aujourd'hui. Après un déluge de recours et de pressions venant de son parti, l'AKP, le Haut Comité électoral turc a annulé, lundi 6 mai, le scrutin municipal d'Istanbul du 31 mars et la victoire du candidat de l'opposition, Ekrem Imamoglu. Motif invoqué : selon ce même organisme, dans l'indépendance duquel voulait encore croire la population, certains des présidents de bureaux de vote n'étaient pas des fonctionnaires.

Pour nombre d'observateurs, ce « putsch des urnes » constitue le dernier clou dans le cercueil de la fragile démocratie turque. « À ce jour, c'était un homme, un vote.

C'est désormais : votez jusqu'à ce que le parti du gouvernement l'emporte », déplore Soner Cagaptay, chercheur au Washington Institute of Near East Policy sur son compte Twitter. Ces dernières années, les irrégularités n'ont cessé de se multiplier à chaque campagne électo-

rale : temps d'antenne limité pour les candidats anti-Erdogan, opposants taxés de « soutien au terrorisme », difficulté d'accès à certains bureaux de vote dans les provinces kurdes du Sud-Est.

Répression

Mais les militants démocrates voulaient encore croire au pouvoir des urnes, comme le dernier maillon d'une chaîne d'espoir qui est en train de voler en éclats. « Un nouveau coup d'État a eu lieu en Turquie », s'emporte Ahmet Sik, député du parti prokurde HDP et ex-journaliste embastillé de *Cumhuriyet*.

Que s'est-il passé dans la tête d'Erdogan ? Celui qui, en 2011, se retrouva fièrement propulsé à la une de *Time Magazine*, était, il n'y a encore pas si longtemps, salué comme étant l'homme du miracle économique turc et le symbole d'un modèle alliant islam et démocratie.

Son ascension commence en novembre 2002, quand les islam-conservateurs du Parti de la justice et du développement (AKP) remportent les élections législatives. Devenu premier ministre l'année

suivante, Recep Tayyip Erdogan modifie profondément le pays : urbanisation, croissance, processus d'adhésion à l'Union européenne, pourparlers de paix avec le PKK. En 2014, il est élu président au suffrage universel direct. Entre-temps, les premiers signes de dérive autoritaire ont commencé à pointer leur nez, notamment lors de la répression des manifestations de Gezi en 2013. En juin 2015 survient la première véritable infraction à la loi des urnes avec l'annulation des législatives et l'organisation d'un scrutin anticipé pour récupérer la majorité parlementaire et barrer la route au parti prokurde HDP, en vertu d'un nouveau discours dans l'ère du temps : « L'AKP ou le chaos. »

Le putsch raté de juillet 2016 l'encourage à accélérer les tours de vis : chasse aux partisans de Fethullah Gülen, accusé d'en être le maître d'œuvre, aux journalistes, aux étudiants, aux professeurs jugés trop critiques... Dans la foulée, Erdogan consolide son alliance avec les ultranationalistes du parti MHP et fait réformer la Constitution pour renforcer son pouvoir. Sa réélection, en juin 2018, entérine l'entrée en vigueur du nouveau régime hyperprésidentiel. En parallèle, des dizaines de mairies situées dans la région du Sud-Est kurde sont placées sous tutelle d'Ankara... à l'instar de ce que vit aujourd'hui Istanbul, sous contrôle temporaire du gouverneur de la métropole, dans l'attente du nouveau scrutin du 23 juin prochain.

« Le pouvoir, une véritable boîte noire »

« L'État est désormais aux mains du président turc, de son clan, de son parti et de leurs nouveaux alliés ultranationalistes », estime la journaliste Ariane Bonzon dans son livre *Turquie, l'heure de vérité* (Éd. Empreinte-Temps présent).

Aujourd'hui, rien ne doit échapper au « nouveau sultan » - c'est ainsi que le surnomme ses détracteurs : ni les relations internationales, ni la politique et encore moins l'économie. Au fil des années, il a consolidé un empire parallèle, où les entreprises de son entourage ont largement bénéficié de ses faveurs : un véritable maillage de réseaux clientélistes qui s'est notamment tissé autour de la municipalité d'Istanbul - son ancien fief, dont il fut élu maire en 1994 - et qui l'aurait poussé à annuler le scrutin du 31 mars. « Entre seulement 2011 et 2018, le nombre de compagnies privées ayant signé des

contrats avec Istanbul est passé de 20 à 30. Certains de leurs patrons ont des relations personnelles avec Erdogan», observe Osman Savaskan, professeur de sciences politiques à l'université de Marmara. Les rumeurs vont bon train sur le pouvoir d'influence de son gendre et ministre des Finances, Berat Al-

bayrak, dans cette décision controversée de convoquer de nouvelles élections. Le nom de Süleyman Soyulu, ministre de l'Intérieur et cacique de l'AKP, revient également souvent. «D'année en année, le noyau dur du pouvoir s'est resserré. À vrai dire, il est de plus en plus difficile de dire qui conseille Er-

dogan et qui prend les décisions. Aujourd'hui, le pouvoir est une véritable boîte noire», relève le politologue İlhan Uzgel.

D'où la difficulté à anticiper les résultats du scrutin du 23 juin. «Impossible de décrypter la stratégie de l'AKP pour regagner des voix. D'ailleurs, parviendra-t-il à séduire ses électeurs déçus? Doit-on voir les récentes attaques contre des journalistes et opposants comme une arme de dissuasion? Le pouvoir sera-t-il capable de fausser les résultats? Personne n'ose faire de pronostics. La politique turque n'a jamais autant manqué de rationalité», souffle un professeur de sociologie. ■

Ce système, qui s'affranchit de la volonté du peuple et méprise la loi, n'est ni démocratique ni légitime. Il s'agit d'une dictature pure et simple.

ONURSAL ADIGÜZEL, PRÉSIDENT DU PARTI D'OPPOSITION CHP, LE 6 MAI 2019

13 500

voix d'avance

étaient attribuées à Ekrem İmamoğlu dans la course pour la Mairie d'Istanbul – avant que ce résultat ne soit annulé

LE FIGARO

vendredi 31 mai 2019

La fronde contre le « sultan » enfle au cœur même de l'AKP

IL AURAIT pu se contenter de féliciter le candidat victorieux de l'opposition. Il aurait pu tendre une main conciliatrice pour désamorcer les tensions. Au contraire, en provoquant un nouveau vote à Istanbul, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan n'a fait que contribuer à consolider ses adversaires. Et surtout, à accentuer les fissures qui prévalent depuis quelque temps au sein de son parti, l'AKP. «Après seize années au pouvoir, le parti craque de l'intérieur. Certains membres osent critiquer sa gestion politique. Ce n'est pas nouveau. Mais c'est la première fois que des voix s'élèvent aussi ouvertement», relève le politologue İlhan Uzgel.

Depuis l'annulation, le 6 mai, des résultats du scrutin d'Istanbul et l'organisation d'un nouveau vote, le 23 juin, une vague de critiques émane de l'intérieur du parti. Habituellement peu disert, l'ancien président turc Abdullah Gül s'est empressé de fustiger, sur son compte Twitter, la décision du Haut Comité électoral (YSK). L'ex-premier ministre Ahmet Davutoğlu a, lui, insisté sur «l'importance d'élections libres et justes pour la démocratie». «La décision de l'YSK va à l'encontre de la loi et heurte ce point de référence», a-t-il insisté sur les réseaux sociaux. Après le revers de l'AKP dans plusieurs grandes

métropoles du pays, Ahmet Davutoğlu avait déjà provoqué la surprise en publiant un «manifeste» de plus d'une dizaine de pages dans lequel il appelait la mouvance politique à tirer les leçons de sa défaite. «Les élections du 31 mars nous ont communiqué beaucoup de messages de la population, et, si nous ne les assimilons pas, de graves conséquences attendent le Parti de la justice et du développement et notre peuple. Nous devons voir en face la faible attractivité de notre peuple pour notre parti, qui est apparu clairement après la perte des municipalités d'Ankara et d'Istanbul», avait-il prévenu.

Dans cette sortie remarquée, Ahmet Davutoğlu avait également émis des inquiétudes face au recul des libertés individuelles, en évoquant en filigrane la stigmatisation des opposants – taxés de soutien au «terrorisme». «Personne ne doit perdre son emploi ou être menacé en raison de ses opinions, et il faut protéger la liberté de critique et d'expression jusqu'au bout», avait insisté celui qui, selon la rumeur, nourrit le dessein de créer un nouveau parti.

Le malaise est profond. «Quand l'AKP est arrivé au pouvoir, en 2002, le parti était animé par le souci d'un juste équilibre entre la question sécuritaire et la liberté d'expression. Aujourd'hui, cet équilibre est rompu au profit de

l'argument sécuritaire», regrette Kemal Oztürk, du quotidien pro-gouvernemental *Yeni Safak*. Pour cet ancien conseiller d'Erdoğan, qui affiche aujourd'hui son désaccord avec l'AKP (dont il est toujours membre), «l'alliance politique scellée avec le MHP (ultranationaliste, NDLR) a porté préjudice à notre parti en l'éloignant de son identité d'origine». La concentration des pouvoirs entre les mains d'un réseau clientéliste pose également problème. «Certaines personnes au sein de l'AKP pensent que, si elles perdent Istanbul, elles perdent leur pouvoir», estime Kemal Oztürk. «Nous devons nous concentrer sur de vastes réformes économiques et démocratiques», insiste, pour sa part, la Tusiad, l'association des hommes d'affaires turcs, dans un communiqué.

Pour nombre d'observateurs, ces dissensions internes sont avant tout symptomatiques de la dérive de l'AKP, «qui n'a plus rien d'un parti politique, mais plutôt d'une organisation au service d'Erdoğan», remarque le journaliste turc Murat Sevinç. Pour autant, la fronde ne doit pas être surestimée. «Quitter l'AKP, tempère-t-il, n'est pas une mince affaire. Ceux qui l'envisagent savent qu'ils peuvent être accusés de trahison. Un nouveau parti politique pourrait voir le jour, mais en prenant le risque de se confronter au pouvoir et à 95% des médias qui sont sous contrôle de l'État.» ■

D. M. (À ISTANBUL)



Nous devons voir en face la faible attractivité de notre peuple pour notre parti, qui est apparu clairement après la perte des municipalités d'Ankara et d'Istanbul.

AHMET DAVUTOĞLU, EX-PREMIER MINISTRE, DANS UN MANIFESTE DANS LEQUEL IL APPELAIT LA MOUVANCE POLITIQUE À TIRER LES LEÇONS DE SA DÉFAITE

Rien ne va plus entre Ankara et les Occidentaux

ISABELLE LASSERRE @ilasserre

AU FUR et à mesure que se radicalise le pouvoir de Recep Tayyip Erdogan, le fossé entre la Turquie et ses partenaires occidentaux se creuse. Les relations n'ont jamais été aussi distantes avec l'Union européenne et aussi problématiques au sein de l'Otan. Quant au lien avec la France, il s'effiloche lui aussi.

Deuxième armée en termes d'effectifs et seul pays musulman de l'Otan, la Turquie est aussi devenue l'un des principaux problèmes de l'Alliance atlantique, même si celle-ci évite généralement d'étaler les désaccords, pourtant fondamentaux, sur la place publique. Les relations se sont dégradées après la tentative de coup d'État contre Erdogan en juillet 2016 et la gigantesque purge qui a suivi, notamment dans l'institution militaire. De nombreux correspondants de l'Alliance en ont été victimes. Les responsables politiques turcs considèrent que l'Alliance et les États-Unis, ces derniers refusant d'extraire l'opposant Fethullah Gülen, accusé d'en être l'instigateur, ont été complices du putsch manqué.

« Membre voyou de l'Otan »

Mais c'est l'achat par Ankara d'un système de défense antimissile russe qui pourrait mettre le feu aux poudres. Les S-400 doivent être livrés cette année à un pilier de l'Alliance atlantique par un pays qui considère l'Otan comme son principal ennemi... Le sujet a créé de vives tensions pendant le 70^e anniversaire de l'Alliance, le mois dernier. Pour les États-Unis, cette acquisition est incompatible avec la sécurité de l'Otan. Elle peut en outre permettre aux Russes de mettre la main sur des données stratégiques relatives aux chasseurs américains F-35. Le Pentagone a répondu en gelant la livraison des F-35 qu'il doit à la Turquie. Il promet de « graves conséquences » pour les relations militaires entre les deux pays si Ankara ne renonce pas à son choix. « La Turquie est devenue le membre voyou de l'Otan, qui met la pression sur ses alliés et devient de plus en plus difficile à gérer car elle a des intérêts nationaux à défendre », résumait récemment



KENZO TRIBOUILLARD/AF

« Il faut sortir de l'hypocrisie qui consiste à penser que l'on peut ouvrir de nouveaux chapitres dans la négociation avec l'Union européenne, ce n'est pas vrai », explique Emmanuel Macron.

dans *Le Figaro* la spécialiste de l'Ifri Dorothee Schmid.

La Turquie a-t-elle encore vocation à rester dans l'Alliance atlantique? La question se pose depuis le rapprochement entre Ankara et Moscou, qui permet à la Turquie et à la Russie de contrebalancer l'influence des États occidentaux, au Moyen-Orient surtout. Mais la rupture n'est pourtant pas pour demain. L'appartenance à l'Otan permet à la Turquie de maintenir son arrimage au continent européen. L'Alliance demeure un pilier de la politique de défense de la Turquie et le restera sans doute durant les années qui viennent, la Russie ne pouvant pas lui fournir les mêmes garanties de sécurité que les États-Unis et l'Otan. Cette évidence explique les hésitations d'Erdogan à franchir définitivement la ligne rouge représentée par l'acquisition de S-400. Quant aux Américains, ils ont encore besoin des bases militaires turques pour continuer à jouer leur rôle dans la région, notamment dans la lutte contre Daech. Ils ont aussi besoin d'Ankara dans leur combat contre l'Iran.

C'est la même chose avec l'Union européenne. L'UE a sanctionné financièrement la Turquie pour non-respect des droits de l'homme. La Commission estime qu'elle « s'éloigne » de l'Europe. L'affirmation de plus en plus forte des intérêts nationaux de la Tur-

quie, souvent contradictoires avec ceux des Européens, explique le statu quo dans lequel se trouvent les négociations avec Bruxelles, puisque officiellement Ankara est toujours candidate à l'entrée dans l'UE. « Mais plus les mois passent, moins le statu quo est tenable. Il va falloir en sortir d'une manière ou d'une autre », prévient un diplomate français. Des voix nombreuses, y compris au Parlement européen, réclament la suspension des négociations. Le temps est venu, disent-elles, de mettre fin à l'ambiguïté, d'imaginer de nouveaux cadres à la relation, une alternative à l'adhésion. Mais personne ne veut encore prendre le risque d'une rupture, tant les sujets à traiter avec la Turquie sont nombreux : Syrie, réfugiés, lutte contre le terrorisme, relations économiques. L'Europe compte sur la Turquie pour jouer, moyennant finances, le rôle de garde-frontières en contenant les 3 millions de réfugiés syriens qui vivent chez elle depuis 2016. Gardienne de l'un des verrous de la Méditerranée, la Turquie rappelle régulièrement son pouvoir aux pays européens en en trouvant parfois le robinet migratoire.

Soutien aux Kurdes critiqué

Quant à la relation franco-turque, elle aussi a connu des jours meilleurs. La France s'inquiète de l'influence grandissante de l'islam turc dans l'Hexagone et de la nébuleuse qu'y construit, comme dans les autres pays européens, le parti d'Erdogan, l'AKP, pour l'actionner à chaque élection en Turquie. Emmanuel Macron fait partie des dirigeants européens qui veulent mettre fin à l'ambivalence. « Il faut sortir de l'hypocrisie qui consiste à penser que l'on peut ouvrir de nouveaux chapitres dans la négociation avec l'Union européenne, ce n'est pas vrai », a-t-il dit en 2018. Il a aussi appelé Ankara « à respecter l'État de droit ».

La Turquie critique quant à elle le soutien apporté par la France aux Kurdes de Syrie, alliés de la coalition internationale mais principaux ennemis d'Ankara dans la région. Le mois dernier, la relation bilatérale a aussi souffert de la décision française de faire du 24 avril la journée nationale de commémoration du génocide arménien. Erdogan a vilipendé les « donneurs de leçons », dont la France, l'accusant d'être responsable du génocide au Rwanda. Une jambe à l'Est, une jambe à l'Ouest. Le grand écart réalisé par la Turquie au-dessus du Bosphore semble bien avoir atteint ses limites. ■

Ce sont des moments clefs de notre époque. Voici leurs déroulements, implications et conséquences.

le récit de l'express



Syrie : la guerre clandestine de la France

Fondé sur les bombardements et les opérations secrètes, l'engagement contre Daech illustre la « mise à distance de la guerre ». Une stratégie contestée jusque chez les militaires.

Par **Laure Marchand et Guillaume Perrier**

Episode 1

OÙ L'OUÛ VOIT QUE L'OPINION PUBLIQUE A ÉTÉ CONSTAMMENT TENUE À L'ÉCART DU CONFLIT

« Les nations occidentales n'ont pas eu la volonté politique d'envoyer 1 000 combattants aguerris régler en quelques semaines le sort de la poche de Hajin et épargner à la population plusieurs mois de guerre. » Cette phrase est extraite d'un article, « La bataille de Hajin : victoire tactique, défaite stratégique ? », publié en février dernier dans la *Revue Défense nationale* (RDN). Le texte a fait l'effet d'un obus lancé dans le débat public. Son auteur est bien placé pour s'exprimer. Le colonel François-Régis Legrier a dirigé la Task Force Wagram – l'artillerie française positionnée à la frontière irako-syrienne – d'octobre 2018 à février 2019. Et son verdict stratégique sur les choix militaires de la coalition internationale, France comprise, pour venir à bout du dernier bastion du groupe Etat islamique, dans l'Est syrien, est sans appel. « En fine, la question qui se pose est de savoir si la libération d'une région ne peut se faire qu'au prix de la destruction de ses infrastructures (hôpitaux, lieux de culte, routes, ponts, habitations, etc.) », s'interroge l'officier, avant de conclure : « Certes, la bataille de Hajin [de septembre 2018 à janvier 2019] a été gagnée mais de façon très poussive, à un coût exorbitant et au prix de nombreuses destructions. »

La ministre des Armées, Florence Parly, s'est aussitôt

mise en colère. L'article a disparu du site Internet de la revue. Les propos auraient pu ternir d'avance la victoire remportée le 23 mars suivant par les Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS). L'armée arabo-kurde alliée à la coalition internationale annonce « officiellement la fin de tous les combats et la victoire contre le groupe Etat islamique et la

« défaite territoriale » de celui-ci. Les djihadistes de Daech, le « califat » dirigé par Abou Bakr al-Baghdadi, qui s'étaient emparés en 2014 d'un territoire grand comme la Hongrie, à cheval sur la Syrie et l'Irak, venaient de rendre les armes dans la ville syrienne de Baghouz, entre l'Euphrate et la frontière irakienne. L'opération « Roundup », lancée par la coalition au printemps 2018, a fini par écraser sous des milliers de tonnes de bombes les dernières positions du groupe Etat islamique (EI) dans l'est de la Syrie. Et laissé, à des kilomètres à la ronde, des ruines, encore des ruines, et des dizaines de milliers d'habitants meurtris. Du chaos syrien nous sont essentiellement parvenues des images du martyr d'Alep, la ville rebelle, détruite par les forces de Bachar el-Assad et les différentes factions djihadistes. Et si peu des effroyables destructions entraînées par les bombardements de la coalition.

Eté 2017. L'offensive contre Raqqa bat son plein. La reprise de la capitale du territoire contrôlé par l'EI, dans le centre de la Syrie, constitue un objectif majeur pour la coalition. Dans une maison réquisitionnée et transformée en « media center », les journalistes sont tenus à quelques kilomètres du front. « Nous perdions des heures à palabrer avec un commissaire politique kurde pour obtenir le droit de nous approcher de la ligne des combats », se souvient l'un d'eux. Officiellement, le maintien à distance s'explique par des raisons de sécurité : « Mais tout le monde savait bien que les YPG [Unités de protection du peuple, la branche syrienne du Parti des travailleurs du Kurdistan (PKK)] ne faisaient qu'appliquer les consignes de la coalition, pour le verrouillage de l'info. » Pendant ce temps, dans le lointain, les gros champignons noirs produits par les bombardements s'élevaient au-dessus de la ville. « Il y a eu très peu d'images de cette bataille. Nous n'avons vu ni ses morts ni ses blessés, ou si peu. » Pourtant, de l'aveu même de l'état-major américain, aucune ville n'avait été autant bombardée que Raqqa depuis la guerre du Vietnam.

Un scénario analogue s'est répété dans les localités de Baghouz, Hajin, Al-Soussa et Al-Chaafa pour chasser les djihadistes. Habitations, bâtiments publics et infrastructures ont été détruits, loin du regard du monde, laissant les populations civiles abandonnées dans le plus grand dénuement. Strictement encadré par des combattants des FDS, un reporter qui souhaite garder l'anonymat (nous l'appellerons « Martin »), est entré dans Hajin au mois de janvier dernier. Les dégâts sur le terrain lui permettent de reconstituer la bataille qui a fait rage à la fin de 2018 : « Plus on avançait et plus les impacts étaient énormes. Sur les routes goudronnées, des trous pouvaient atteindre 10 mètres de diamètre, ce qui correspond aux dégâts d'une bombe de 1 tonne. » Deux ans avant, il avait couvert avec une grande liberté de mouvement la reprise de Mossoul,



ETAT-MAJOR DES ARMÉES/AFAP

« Le public n'est pas informé. C'est un vrai problème pour la démocratie »

■■■
 bastion de l'EI en Irak : « La politique de la coalition en matière d'accès à la lutte contre Daech a changé du tout au tout. Nous sommes passés du grand show à une communication beaucoup plus fermée. »

Retour en février 2019, dans Al-Chaafa reprise aux djihadistes. La ville n'est pas encore entièrement sécurisée. En embuscade, quelques snipers de Daech se dissimulent dans des maisons. Martin, le journaliste, aperçoit quatre hommes sur le toit d'une maison à deux étages. Ils sont équipés de matériel optique « pour repérer des cibles » et d'une antenne de communication par satellite. Un missile antichar, de ceux qui servent à détruire les voitures utilisées pour les attentats suicides, est posé sur le parapet, en diagonale, à portée de mains. Pantalons beiges de trekking, lunettes de soleil, les hommes sont en civil. Ce sont des militaires, des Occidentaux. « A leur attitude, je comprends qu'ils sont français. Evidemment, il est hors de question de les montrer. » Car, officiellement, Paris n'a pas engagé de forces terrestres en Syrie. Et de la guerre que la France mène sur ce territoire depuis quatre ans ne nous parviennent que quelques échos, affaiblis par les 3 000 kilomètres qui nous en séparent. C'est une tradition de la République française, tout se passe en « secret », déplore le colonel à la retraite et analyste Michel Goya : « Le public n'est pas informé des décisions. C'est un vrai problème pour la démocratie. »

Episode 2

OÙ LES ATTENTATS DU THALYS PUIS DE PARIS PRÉCIPITENT L'ENTRÉE EN GUERRE DE FRANÇOIS HOLLANDE

Blême, François Hollande se tourne vers son état-major. « Et s'il avait réussi son coup ? » Le 21 août 2015, le Marocain Ayoub el-Khazzani, 25 ans, armé d'un fusil d'assaut AKM et d'un pistolet automatique, vient d'être maîtrisé par des passagers alors qu'il s'apprêtait à commettre un carnage dans le Thalys reliant Amsterdam à Paris. On ne le sait pas encore, mais il appartient à la cellule terroriste franco-belge qui, autour d'Abdelhamid Abaaoud, organisera les attentats de Paris et Saint-Denis du 13 novembre 2015 et ceux de Bruxelles, en mars 2016. Le président français veut réagir vite. L'ordre de frapper en Syrie est donné. Jusque-là, la France s'était contentée de participer aux actions de la coalition internationale uniquement sur le sol irakien. Mais elle avait refusé d'engager des troupes en Syrie, pour ne pas venir en aide, même indirectement, au régime de Bachar el-Assad. « C'était la position de Laurent Fabius [alors ministre des Affaires étrangères] contre celle de Jean-Yves Le Drian [Défense]. Tout a basculé avec le Thalys », précise une source proche de François Hollande.

Le 16 novembre 2015, trois jours après les attaques perpétrées par les commandos d'Abaaoud à Paris et à Saint-Denis (130 morts et plus de 350 blessés), le président, sous le choc, annonce devant le Parlement réuni en Congrès, sa décision d'« intensifier les opérations [de la France] en Syrie ». François Hollande se pose en chef de guerre et promet une vengeance impitoyable : « La France est en guerre. Les actes commis vendredi soir à Paris et près du Stade de France sont des actes de guerre. [...] Ils sont le fait d'une armée djihadiste, le groupe Daech, qui nous combat parce que la France est un pays de liberté, parce que nous sommes la patrie des droits de l'homme. [...] Hier soir, j'ai donné l'ordre à 10 chasseurs bombardiers français de larguer leurs bombes sur le fief de Daech à Raqqa. [...] Il faut plus de frappes. [...] Notre ennemi en Syrie, c'est Daech. »

Les raids français sur Raqqa, capitale du « califat » en Syrie, redoublent. Les avions français s'envolent du porte-



Ravages Les offensives au sol des forces kurdo-arabes ont été précédées par un tapis de bombes, transformant les villes en champs de ruines (ici Hajin, en février 2019).

avions Charles-de-Gaulle, des Emirats arabes unis et de la base Prince-Hassan, située dans le désert jordanien, à quelques encablures des frontières irakienne et syrienne, pour aller pilonner les djihadistes dans leur dernier réduit, dans la vallée de l'Euphrate en Syrie. Jusqu'à 12 appareils français ont été utilisés, au plus fort de la campagne de bombardements, épaulés par un avion de reconnaissance bourré de capteurs et par le Transall C-160 Gabriel, qui intercepte les communications ennemies. La Task Force Wagram, avec ses batteries d'artillerie déployées en Irak, est l'autre pilier de ce dispositif. C'est à une guerre menée à bonne distance du théâtre des opérations terrestres que se joignent les forces françaises.

Peu après l'irruption de Daech, en 2014, l'entrée en scène des avions de la coalition internationale avait changé la donne. Quatre années durant, un tapis de bombes devancera les Kurdes des unités YPG dans leur progression au sol. Sur le théâtre syrien, la bataille de Kobané (septembre 2014-janvier 2015), ville frontalière de la Turquie, marque le premier coup d'arrêt de l'expansion fulgurante du jeune EI. Malgré une résistance acharnée des djihadistes et le trouble jeu d'Ankara, qui maintient sa frontière close, les Kurdes finissent par repousser Daech. Le jour de la libération, une odeur de mort flotte sur la place de la Liberté. Des dizaines de cadavres de djihadistes gisent au hasard des ruines, pulvérisés par les bombes, ensevelis sous les gravats. « Le plomb a volé sans interruption pendant quatre mois. C'était très dur, avec des plagues de quinze

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Emotion Les attentats de 2015 conduisent à une rumeur militante : « Il faut aller à l'aide de nos frères, d'euros de bombes sur un pseudo camp d'entraînement. »

Goût amer La chute de Baghouz, le 23 mars, a signifié la fin du califat. Un officier français juge le coût - humain, matériel - de la victoire « exorbitant ».



ou seize heures de tirs sans relâche », témoigne Rebwar, un jeune combattant kurde. Reconquise, réinvestie par ses habitants, mais martyrisée, la ville est détruite « à 70 % ». Plus de 700 frappes ont été nécessaires, estime alors Asmat Cheikh Hassan, « ministre de la Défense » du canton autonome kurde de Kobané.

Ce n'est qu'après les attentats de 2015 que l'aviation française se joindra à la coalition en Syrie. Depuis Kobané, les combattants des YPG constituent le bras armé de l'Occident, la force au sol dans cette guerre par procuration. De parias les Kurdes deviennent des héros aux yeux des Occidentaux. Fers de lance de l'opération « Colère de l'Euphrate », ils lancent la contre-offensive vers le Sud syrien, délivrent la ville carrefour de Manbij en août 2016, puis Raqqa, avant de repousser l'ennemi vers l'est en suivant la rive orientale du grand fleuve, jusqu'au cul-de-sac de Baghouz. L'Euphrate dessine une nouvelle séparation. Au sud et à l'ouest, la zone contrôlée par le régime de Bachar el-Assad, appuyé par la Russie et l'Iran. Au nord et à l'est, le territoire tenu par les Kurdes et leurs alliés arabes au sein des Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS), soutenus par la coalition internationale, mais sous la menace de la Turquie. Chacun fait sa guerre, sur sa rive. La « capitale » de l'EI en Syrie, Raqqa, est assiégée pendant de longs mois, bombardée sans relâche. Le 3 juillet 2017, les hauts murs d'enceinte en forme de fer à cheval, construits au VIII^e siècle par les califes abbassides, sont franchis.

Le lendemain, jour de la fête nationale aux Etats-Unis, un convoi américain composé de plusieurs dizaines de camions chargés d'armes lourdes, de véhicules blindés et d'engins de terrassement fait son entrée en fanfare. Les forces spéciales américaines, plusieurs centaines d'hommes dotés de blindés Humvee et de pick-up hérissés de mitrailleuses, sont très visibles à chacune de ces batailles. Des unités au sol qui encadrent les milices arabo-kurdes, guident les frappes, fournissent du renseignement et mènent des opérations spéciales. Les Britanniques et les Italiens sont là, plus discrets. Quid des Français ? A Raqqa, plusieurs dizaines d'entre eux occupent une villa pourvue d'une improbable piscine, près d'un pont détruit sur le front Ouest. Mais les reporters qui les croisent sur le terrain ont l'interdiction formelle de les filmer, de les photographier. Et même de leur adresser la parole ! Pourtant, déjà en 2015, juste après la victoire de Kobané, une base française s'était établie sur la colline de Mistenour, en surplomb de la ville. Les forces spéciales se sont aussi installées dans une ancienne usine de ciment Lafarge transformée en base militaire, comme l'indique, dès 2016, *Le Monde*... Mais, officiellement, il n'y a pas de forces françaises terrestres engagées. La réponse du ministère des Armées est immuable : « Aucun commentaire. »

Episode 3

**OU L'ON APPREND QUE LA FRANCE RENONÇA
À UNE FRAPPE CONTRE ABDELHAMID ABAOUD
EN RAISON DU RISQUE ÉLEVÉ DE MORTS CIVILS**

« La France est le deuxième pays frappeur de la coalition. » Quand il s'agit de la guerre à distance, le ministère des Armées accepte de donner des chiffres. Depuis 2015, Paris a procédé à environ 1550 frappes aériennes. Une contribution de poids, mais loin des chiffres de l'aviation américaine, responsable de près de 90 % des opérations aériennes contre Daech. En moins de cinq ans, 34 000 frappes ont été ordonnées par la coalition, 50 000 bombes larguées. Et le rythme ne s'est pas ralenti avec l'encerclement des derniers djihadistes : 600 frappes en novembre, 750 en décembre, plus de 1200 en janvier... A Raqqa et à Hajin, le bourdonnement incessant des avions de reconnaissance, invisibles à l'œil nu, était devenu familier des combattants et des reporters. Comme celui des drones, annonçant l'imminence de frappes. Sans cet appui



aérien, les FDS n'auraient jamais pu avancer. En quatre mois de siège, à Raqqa, les ponts, les routes et plus de 10 000 bâtiments et immeubles ont été pulvérisés ou aplatis, la ville a été détruite à 80 %... Une « guerre d'anéantissement » a été lancée sur le nord de la Syrie pour venir à bout du « califat », selon la formule lancée, en mai 2017, par James Mattis, alors secrétaire d'Etat américain à la Défense. Avec son lot inévitable de « dommages collatéraux ».

La position française sur cette question est ambiguë. Avec la Russie, elle est l'un des rares belligérants à ne reconnaître aucune mort civile depuis le début du conflit. Pourtant, des centaines de civils ont été tués dans les bombardements. « La France est silencieuse, c'est une spécificité, souligne le Britannique Chris Woods, un ancien journaliste de la BBC, fondateur, en 2014, de l'ONG Airwars, qui recense les morts de non-combattants. Elle bombarde des zones où des civils sont tués, elle a frappé plus de 1500 fois, mais ne reconnaît aucune victime. C'est statistiquement impossible. Il faut plus de transparence. La tolérance des démocraties occidentales aux morts civiles de cette guerre n'est pas acceptable. » Les Britanniques sont à peine plus crédibles : un civil tué pour 4 013 terroristes neutralisés ! Bilan jugé « absurde » par Lydia Wilson, chercheuse à l'université d'Oxford. Les Australiens, eux, ont retiré leurs avions après la mort accidentelle de civils en 2017.

A Paris, l'état-major élude systématiquement le sujet et s'abrite derrière la coalition. Or cette dernière ne communique aucune donnée par pays. Le bilan des dégâts est



livré mensuellement et fait état de « 1257 civils tués non intentionnellement » depuis 2014. Des chiffres qui restent nettement sous-évalués. Airwars avance une estimation de 7500 à 12000 morts, en ne tenant compte que des cas scrupuleusement vérifiés et documentés. Parmi ces victimes, au moins 2000 enfants. Selon d'autres décomptes, le siège de Mossoul, en Irak, pourrait avoir causé plus de 20 000 décès. Celui de Raqqa, des centaines. Un rapport d'Amnesty International paru fin avril estime à au moins 1600 le nombre de civils tués au cours des quatre mois de siège de la capitale de Daech en Syrie. A-t-on négligé le sort des habitants ? Les « bavures » sont-elles devenues une simple variable d'ajustement dans cette guerre contre le terrorisme ?

Si le « zéro mort » est impossible, le cabinet du ministère des Armées indique que « la France est un pays qui fait particulièrement attention à cela ». L'ancien colonel des troupes de marine Michel Goya le confirme. « L'état-major prend des précautions extrêmes. De nombreuses Les Australiens, eux, ont retiré leurs avions après la mort accidentelle de civils en 2017.

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tembre, cible clairement « Abaaoud, acteur clef de la menace projetée vers l'Europe ». Mais, face au risque trop élevé de morts de civils, le projet de frappe a été reporté.

C'est tout le dilemme de la « mise à distance de la guerre », cette stratégie qui consiste à combattre de loin, dénoncée par le colonel Legrier dans son article qui a mis le feu aux poudres. « Normalement, le soldat doit assumer les risques, éviter les pertes civiles fait partie de sa mission, complète l'analyste Michel Goya. Mais nous sommes tétanisés par l'idée de perdre des soldats. Les batailles prennent plus de temps et font plus de dégâts. » Les armées modernes, gavées de technologie, font la guerre à distance plutôt que de déployer des forces au sol. C'est le modèle américain qui s'est imposé au monde et à la France, membre de l'Otan. Car c'est bien Washington qui dicte les choix stratégiques. « *No boots on the ground* (Pas de bottes sur le terrain) », tel est le mantra des Occidentaux dans leur guerre contre Daech.

Dès le premier jour de l'engagement en Irak et en Syrie, en août 2014, des officiers américains critiquent pourtant ouvertement cette méthode, jugée contraire à la logique militaire. Mais les milliers de soldats tués sur les terrains irakien et afghan depuis 2001, la noria de cercueils rapatriés dans les soutes des avions-cargos, ont traumatisé les présidences successives. L'opinion y est hostile. « A la place des soldats, ce sont les civils qui trinquent, rien de neuf de ce côté-là », juge le géostratège Gérard Chaliand. Privilégier les bombardements aériens, c'est faire le choix de transférer le risque sur les populations civiles.

Un choix clairement assumé par Donald Trump. Depuis son élection, le président américain a étendu les autorisations de frappes et raccourci les procédures, ce qui a accru les risques pour les civils, au grand dam des militaires. Consacrée par les conventions de Genève de 1949, la protection des non-combattants sur les terrains de conflits est de plus en plus souvent remise en question. « Le problème, c'est que nous avons la convention de Genève et toutes sortes de lois et de règlements qui font que le soldat a peur de combattre », avait déclaré Donald Trump lors de la campagne présidentielle, en 2016. Les généraux américains ont fait le constat, depuis l'Afghanistan, que les bombardements sur des populations civiles créent du ressentiment et peuvent être utilisés médiatiquement par l'ennemi. La même erreur est-elle répétée en Syrie ? « Des preuves solides montrent que les frappes aériennes et les tirs de la coalition ont tué et blessé des milliers de civils, touchés notamment par des attaques disproportionnées ou aveugles qui sont contraires au droit international humanitaire et pourraient constituer des crimes de guerre », conclut un récent rapport de l'ONG Amnesty International sur le siège de Raqqa en 2017.

Pour les deux seuls mois d'octobre et novembre 2018, dans la poche de Hajin, l'ONG Airwars évalue à 313 le nombre de civils morts dans les bombardements, essentiellement des femmes et des enfants. Il s'agit de leur estimation basse. De son côté, le collectif Familles unies, dont les membres sont concernés par le départ en Syrie d'un proche, a recensé une trentaine d'enfants et de femmes français tués en novembre. Le 13 novembre, alors que la nuit palissait, 7 adultes et 17 enfants auraient ainsi péri dans le bombardement d'une maison. Dans la banlieue



« La France ne reconnaît aucune victime. C'est impossible »

Déluge de feu Capitale syrienne de Daech, Raqqa a été détruite à 80 %. Des forces spéciales françaises y ont opéré.



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parisienne, Abdel (son prénom a été changé), un maçon à la retraite, a appris que sa fille et trois de ses petits-enfants faisaient partie des victimes. Selon un communiqué de la coalition, 24 frappes aériennes ont été effectuées dans la zone au petit matin. « Une mère, prévenue par sa fille là-bas, me l'a annoncé par téléphone. » Depuis, le vieil homme remue ciel et terre pour retrouver les deux petits survivants de la fratrie. Ils auraient été repérés dans le camp d'Al-Hol, dans l'est de la Syrie.

Episode 4

OÙ IL EST QUESTION DE BASES CLANDESTINES,
D'ASSASSINATS CIBLÉS ET DES QUESTIONS
QU'ILS SOULEVENT

Un instant, Michael Enright s'est cru sur un plateau de cinéma, bombardé d'effets spéciaux. Cet acteur britannique a connu son plus grand succès en 2006 au côté de Johnny Depp dans *Pirates des Caraïbes. Le secret du coffre maudit*. Mais, dix ans après, il se trouve près de Raqqa, uniforme des YPG sur le dos, planqué dans une maison où viennent de faire irruption des djihadistes de Daech armés jusqu'aux dents. Soudain, un obus souffle la moitié de la maison. Un commando fait irruption dans l'autre partie. « C'est grâce aux forces spéciales françaises que je m'en suis tiré, ils ont été formidables, s'exclame-t-il, exalté, en levant le pouce vers le ciel. Je m'en suis sorti sans une égratignure, du travail de professionnel! »

Volontaire engagé au sein des forces kurdes, comme des dizaines de « brigadistes internationaux » venus du monde entier, Michael a souvent eu l'occasion de croiser les Français durant les longs mois passés au front. Pendant la bataille de Manbij, en 2016, pendant le siège de Raqqa, en 2017, ils accompagnent la progression des forces arabo-kurdes qui luttent pied à pied contre Daech. Près des lignes, ils encadrent les combattants. Dans leurs pick-up surmontés d'antennes satellites, parfois même dans des blindés, ils passent en trombe sur les pistes défoncées. Une équipe du service de communication des Armées les accompagne sur le terrain en permanence. La présence dans le nord de la Syrie de membres des forces spéciales et de commandos parachutistes a été largement éventée. En 2018, la Turquie a même révélé, via l'antenne française de son agence de presse étatique, Anadolu, l'emplacement des six bases et le nombre d'hommes, environ 200, affectés à ces missions clandestines.

Pourtant, officiellement, la France n'a jamais combattu Daech sur le sol syrien. A Paris, le sujet est top secret. Le dispositif bleu-blanc-rouge se résume à la base aérienne jordanaïenne et à la Task Force Wagram, quatre batteries de Caesar (des camions équipés d'un système d'artillerie) installés à la frontière syrienne, en Irak. Mais, sur les opérations secrètes, les autorités restent muettes, à l'inverse des Américains et des Britanniques, qui n'en font pas mystère.

La fameuse cimenterie Lafarge, située au bord d'une route entre Alep et Raqqa, a abrité dès 2015 l'un des QG des forces spéciales françaises et occidentales dans la région. Interdiction de s'en approcher. En 2016, des journalistes occidentaux trop curieux l'ont appris à leurs dépens. Ils se sont retrouvés mis en joue par des soldats américains postés à l'entrée du complexe, contraints de faire demi-tour en quatrième vitesse. Mais personne ne pouvait ignorer la présence de ces forces étrangères dans l'usine de ciment. Ni dans le village voisin ni au check-point qui verrouille la route à cet endroit. Les allées et venues incessantes des hélicoptères Black Hawk et des véhicules militaires ont vite attiré l'attention. Que font ces forces spéciales françaises en Syrie ? Guidage des frappes ? Renseignement ?

Interrogatoires ? Opérations d'élimination ? Quelle est la nature de cette guerre secrète ? En septembre 2017, la mort d'un « para » en mission a donné un indice. Le lieu de son décès n'a pas été communiqué. Mais, à cette date, les combats faisaient rage pour reprendre les derniers quartiers de Raqqa, en Syrie. L'adjudant du 13^e régiment de dragons parachutistes a été mortellement atteint par un tir, alors que la position sur laquelle il se trouvait était sous le feu.

François Hollande est le seul à avoir levé le voile sur un autre aspect de la guerre clandestine contre le terrorisme. Dans « *Un président ne devrait pas dire ça...* », il reconnaît avoir déclenché en 2015

quatre opérations « homo », des assassinats ciblés. Cette campagne d'éliminations a été plus vaste encore, une quarantaine de cas au moins, estime le journaliste d'investigation Vincent Nouzille, auteur des *Tueurs de la République*. Des listes de « HVT » (high value targets, ou cibles de haute valeur) ont été dressées dans le bunker de Balard, au ministère des Armées. Pendant la reconquête de Mossoul, les officiers irakiens s'étaient vu remettre des listes de djihadistes français à abattre. Et tous les terroristes, impliqués de près ou de loin dans les attentats de novembre 2015, ont été éliminés sans autre forme de procès. Emmanuel Macron a poursuivi la même stratégie vengeresse. Ainsi les frères Fabien et Jean-Michel Clain, des djihadistes français devenus de hauts cadres de l'EI, ont été tués en février dernier dans les combats à Baghouz, dans le dernier carré de Daech. En emportant avec eux leurs secrets.

Cette lutte contre un ennemi atypique permet-elle de prendre des libertés avec le droit de la guerre ? Quel contrôle indépendant s'exerce sur ces opérations ? « L'action clandestine de la France peut se justifier, estime Jean-Vincent Holeindre, professeur de science politique à l'université Paris-II et spécialiste des problématiques militaires. Qu'il y ait une part d'ombre nécessaire, au nom de la raison d'Etat, est un élément de la stratégie. Mais aucune stratégie ne peut faire l'économie d'une réflexion sur sa légitimité et sur les normes. »

Episode 5

OÙ DES OFFICIERS FRANÇAIS AFFICHENT
LEUR SCEPTICISME QUANT À LA SUITE
DE LA GUERRE CONTRE DAECH

Dès le départ, le cadre juridique de l'intervention française en Syrie est flou. Les frappes sur le sol syrien ont en effet été justifiées par l'article 51 de la charte des Nations unies, reconnaissant à un Etat « le droit à la légitime défense ». Mais l'engagement de la France n'a pas donné lieu à un vote des parlementaires. Le 15 septembre 2015, Manuel Valls, alors Premier ministre, se borne à informer les députés de la décision de François Hollande. Rien d'illégal à cela. C'est une spécificité hexagonale, le chef de l'Etat engage seul le pays dans la guerre et dispose d'un état-major particulier.

De plus, la recherche sur les questions militaires est rarement indépendante de l'armée. Les universités et les

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« La France
n'évite pas
les erreurs
commises par
l'Amérique »

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laboratoires de recherche ignorent encore largement les *war studies*, les « études de la guerre », qui se sont développées dans les pays anglo-saxons à la suite des attentats du 11 septembre 2001. Dès le lendemain de l'attaque d'Al-Qaeda, George W. Bush, mégaphone à la main dans la poussière de Ground Zero, lance la « guerre mondiale contre le terrorisme ». Et le Texan franchit très vite la ligne rouge de l'illégalité, comme l'atteste le sort des prisonniers de Guantanamo ou de la prison irakienne d'Abou Ghraïb. Pour l'Américaine Claire Finkelstein, professeure de philosophie et fondatrice, en 2009, du premier centre universitaire consacré à l'éthique de la guerre aux Etats-Unis, « les militaires n'ont pas été assez forts sur leurs valeurs et le droit a trop souvent été perçu comme un obstacle ». Dans les formations qu'elle anime, elle constate que les militaires sont souvent désarmés « lorsqu'ils reçoivent un ordre illégal ». « Il arrive régulièrement que les forces spéciales ne sachent plus qui elles doivent tuer ou épargner. »

A Paris, les attentats de 2015 ont conduit à un engagement militaire dicté par l'émotion, selon Michel Goya, qui critique ces « opérations anxioyotiques » destinées à rassurer l'opinion : « Nous y sommes allés pour montrer que l'on faisait quelque chose, improvisant au fur et à mesure, la fleur au fusil. » En pleine polémique Legrier, Georges Malbrunot, reporter au *Figaro*, a déroulé en quelques tweets « les confidences d'un militaire [qui se trouvait en cette mi-novembre 2015] aux avant-postes ». « L'Elysée nous appelle : "Il faut taper, il faut taper sur les ponts, taper sur les convois." Ils étaient très en colère. J'ai répondu : "Pour taper, il me faut des cibles. Des cibles fiables, je ne veux pas taper pour le plaisir et faire des victimes civiles." » Le haut gradé explique qu'il n'a pas « d'objectifs ». Son interlocuteur élyséen répond : « Il faut frapper, ne vous foutez pas de ma gueule ! » Décision a été prise de bombarder des hangars et « un camp d'entraînement de djihadistes », selon le communiqué officiel. En réalité, « un parcours du combattant vide au milieu de nulle part ». « On a balancé pour 5 millions d'euros de bombes sur un pseudo-camp d'entraînement. De la com' ! »

Quatre ans plus tard, le traumatisme des attentats reste

vif, d'autant que la menace se maintient à un niveau élevé. Le climat de peur pèse sur les décisions politiques. « L'attente des Français, c'est que l'on détruise les terroristes dans la zone syrienne. C'est la considération qui guide tout le reste », répondait-on au cabinet du ministère des Armées, en janvier. C'est aussi le discours de Florence Parly. Le soir du 31 décembre dernier, sur la « base aérienne projetée » installée dans le désert jordanien, la ministre assurait vouloir « achever le travail » et « détruire Daech ». Mais ce ton martial, perçu comme déconnecté de la réalité du terrain, fait grincer des dents au sein même de l'institution militaire.

« La France n'évite pas les erreurs commises par l'Amérique après le 11 Septembre. On y est. » Le jugement est émis par un spécialiste reconnu des questions militaires et de sécurité. Dans la riposte à une attaque d'une ampleur telle que celle du 13 novembre 2015, la tentation est grande de vouloir répliquer du tac au tac, de déshumaniser les terroristes, de restreindre les libertés pour rassurer l'opinion sans mesurer les conséquences d'un tel renoncement. « Le risque peut être de voir la société basculer dans un état de panique morale créé par le terrorisme, estime Jean-Vincent Holeindre. Face aux attentats, il faut réaffirmer les principes démocratiques et renforcer les contre-pouvoirs. Il y a un certain nombre de règles à ne pas enfreindre. A la fois pour des raisons qui relèvent de la démocratie, mais aussi de l'efficacité. »

Fin mars, Baghouz est tombée. L'EI a perdu son territoire. Peut-il survivre ? « Daech est déjà reparti dans la clandestinité, on navigue à vue », avance un ancien officier. Le colonel François-Régis Legrier, contre qui sa ministre de tutelle a réclamé des sanctions, ne disait pas autre chose dans son article, qui se concluait ainsi : « [La coalition internationale livre] une détestable image de ce que peut être une libération à l'occidentale laissant derrière [elle] les germes d'une résurgence prochaine d'un nouvel adversaire. Nous n'avons en aucune façon gagné la guerre faute d'une politique réaliste et persévérante et d'une stratégie adéquate. Combien de Hajin faudra-t-il pour comprendre que nous faisons fausse route ? » **L. M. et G. P.**

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Syrie : 450 Français liés au groupe État islamique détenus par les Kurdes

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Le ministre des Affaires étrangères Jean-Yves Le Drian a rappelé mardi que la France s'oppose au retour des hommes et des épouses, considérés comme des combattants.

Environ 450 ressortissants français affiliés au groupe État islamique (EI) sont détenus par les Kurdes ou retenus dans des camps de réfugiés dans le nord-est de la Syrie, a indiqué mardi le chef de la diplomatie française.

"Dans la zone du nord-est syrien, on considère qu'il y a à peu près 400 à 450 Français, certains dans des camps, d'autres prisonniers, dont des enfants", a déclaré Jean-Yves Le Drian lors d'une audition devant la Commission des Affaires étrangères de l'Assemblée nationale.

PARIS S'OPPOSE AU RETOUR DES HOMMES

Il a rappelé que seuls les enfants étaient susceptibles d'être rapatriés en France, s'ils sont orphelins ou si leur mère donne leur accord, Paris s'opposant au retour des hommes et des épouses considérés comme des combat-

tants. "Notre logique est toujours la même et on n'en bougera pas : les combattants doivent être jugés là où ils ont commis leurs crimes", a déclaré le ministre des Affaires étrangères.

"Les enfants, s'ils sont orphelins ou si, d'aventure, il y avait l'autorisation de leur mère, mais c'est au cas par cas, pourraient être rapatriés en France", a-t-il ajouté. "C'est ce que nous avons commencé à faire et c'est ce que nous poursuivons", a-t-il dit. Cinq orphelins sont ainsi revenus le 15 mars et une fillette de trois ans, dont la mère a été condamnée à la perpétuité en Irak, l'a été le 27 mars.

"BOMBE À RETARDEMENT"

Jean-Yves Le Drian a indiqué par ailleurs que plus d'une centaine de djihadistes français étaient présents dans la poche d'Idleb, dernier bastion djihadiste en Syrie pilonné depuis un mois par le régime de Bachar al-Assad.

"Il y a dans la zone d'Idleb plus d'une centaine de combattants français (repérés)", a-t-il dit, qualifiant cette poche de "véritable bombe à retardement" avec la présence de "30 000 combattants" (rebelles et djihadistes) et le risque



Un combattant des Unités de protection du peuple (YPG) kurdes attend le démarrage d'une fouille de prisonniers, près de Baghouz, en février 2019 afp.com/Delil_souleiman

d'un afflux de réfugiés de cette zone vers l'Europe.

La province d'Idleb ainsi que des secteurs des provinces voisines de Hama, Alep et Lattaquié sont tenus par le groupe djihadiste Hayat Tahrir al-Cham (HTS, ex-branche d'Al-Qaïda). ■