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ASSASSINATION OF KURDISH ACTIVISTS: EUROPEAN CHALLENGES AFTER THE ATTACK IN PARIS

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On 23 December 2022, a French assassin carried out a racially motivated attack on the Ahmet Kaya Cultural Centre in the Rue d'Enghien in the 10th arrondissement of Paris. Heavy rioting in Paris followed immediately afterwards, as did solidarity rallies across Europe. Protesters challenged the theory of a single perpetrator and accused Turkey of complicity or even responsibility. The reactions to the attack are important for the Kurdish scene in general and for Europe's relationship with the Kurds and Turkey in particular; but above all it forces Europeans to define their interests regarding northern Syria.

Emine Kara and the PKK in Europe

Among the three victims was Emine Kara, the chairperson of the Democratic Kurdish Council – France (CDK – F, Conseil démocratique kurde – France). Kara, nome de guerre Evîn Goyî, came from a village in the Uludere district in the Kurdish south-east of Turkey. There are conflicting and contradicting reports about her life. She was born in either 1970 or 1974 and joined the ranks of the PKK in 1988 i.e. with 18 or as a minor with 14 years of age. She fought in the ranks of one of the PKK's Women's Units either as early as 1988 or as late as 1994, when her family fled to the Maxmur refugee camp in Iraq in the wake of the Turkish military's eradication of villages. Only after the 2022 attack did the organisation reveal that she had been a member of the PKK's highest leadership body, the twelve-member KCK Executive Council, whose leadership has been located in Iraq's Kandil Mountains since 2013.

In 2014, she was sent to northern Syria (Rojava), where she was tasked with organising the civil administration. In this position she played an important role for the rescue of and care for Yazidi refugees from Sinjar. In 2019, she was sent to Europe for health

reasons. Some sources claim that she had been wounded earlier that year fighting the IS in Raqqa, others say she had had orthopaedic problems since 1999 because of the strains she endured as a fighter.

In France, she sought political asylum and immediately became active in the PKK by taking over the leadership of the CDK-F in Paris. At the same time she was involved in the Kurdish Women's Movement – Europe (TJK-E Tevgera Jinên Kurd li Ewropa), a part of the Free Women's Movement (TJA-Tevgera Jinên Azad). In 2022, the Iranian women's protest movement adopted the TJA slogan Woman – Life – Freedom („Jin Jiy-an Azadi“ or Persian: „Zan, Zendegi, Azadi“).

As is well known, from 2005 onwards the PKK had itself transformed and renamed pursuant to a programme drafted by Abdullah Öcalan in prison. Since 2007, the organisation has been called the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK – Koma Civakên Kurdistan), and its subordinates include the new Brussels-based European organisation European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress (KCD-E – Kongreya Civaka Kurd li Ewropa), whose leaders Fatoş Gökşungur and Yüksel Koç took part in a mourning rally in Paris on the day of the attack. The national sub-associations belong to the KCD-E, about which confusion often reigns due to their numerous rebrandings: for example, the German association Yek-Kom was renamed Nav-Dem in 2014 and has been called the Confederation of Kurdistan Communities in Germany (Kon-Med) since 2019; in Austria, the Council of Kurdish Associations (Feykom) and the Democratic Social Centre (Dem-Kurd) share the same address; and in France, the Feyka was renamed CDK-F.

These organisations are usually allied with the corresponding arena of left-wing radicals in Europe. Feykom is involved, inter alia, within the framework of the Party of the European Left, an umbrella organisation of communist organisations, KCD-E joined ICOR (the International Coordination of Revolutionary Parties and Organisations, another Maoist-oriented communist umbrella organisation) in 2015, and at the protest rallies in December 2022, CDK-F emphasised the solidarity of the French communists and other left-wing extremists.

However, the doubts concerning the theory of a single perpetrator are only partly rooted in the Kurds' general critical attitude towards state power (meaning any state). A few months ago, CDK-F demanded police protection, and observers claim that the assassin was dropped off right in front of the CDK-F meeting place and only by chance missed an important coordination meeting of the cadre. The attack took place at the time of intensive preparations for the big annual protests in early January to

commemorate the triple murder of Kurdish activists in Paris in 2013 and to call for the release of Abdullah Öcalan from prison.

Moreover, Kara was not the first member of the Executive Council to meet a violent end. In 2019, five, in 2020-21 four, and in 2022 three members were killed by drone attacks or drone-based operations by Turkish security forces. Given this series, it is not surprising that Kurdish activists find it difficult to accept that the assassination of Emine Kara, the fourth member of the Executive Council to be killed in 2022, was an attack carried out by a lone perpetrator. The bitterness and anger was directed against the French state, which, according to Kurdish activists, is doing too little to investigate the assassinations of December 2022 and January 2013. Above all, the demonstrators demanded recognition and support for Rojava and the decriminalisation of the PKK.

An Organisation Under Pressure

The murder of Kara and her comrades took place at a time when the organisation as a whole is under heavy pressure. Ankara has enjoyed military and diplomatic successes in the fight against the Öcalan movement for several years. For example, the KCK's attempt to make an international issue of the alleged Turkish use of poison gas against its fighters failed, and Ankara was also able to ignore Iraqi criticism of Turkish actions in northern Iraq. Ankara's threat of a military campaign against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES/Rojava) regularly causes irritation with the USA, but this should be seen as part of a larger alignment of interests. At the same time, Ankara is sounding out Moscow and Damascus on the possibilities of an invasion to be followed by the repatriation of some of the Syrian refugees currently in Turkey in order to strengthen President Erdoğan's 2023 election campaign.

Likewise, Turkey relatively successfully uses Sweden's and Finland's applications for NATO membership to persuade them to

revise their friendly attitudes towards the Kurds. Moreover, in recent years Ankara has responded to the successful lobbying and organising work of Öcalan supporters in Europe by completely modernising and restructuring its international cultural and socio-political activities: The Presidium for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB - Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Toplulukları Başkanlığı), founded in 2010, aims, inter alia, to promote the political participation of Turks abroad in order to intensify or improve relations with Turkey through the ballot box and civil-society activism. Ever since, pro-migration parties in Europe have to choose between Kurdish revolutionary romanticism and Turkish electoral arithmetic. And finally, the organisation is not undisputed in the international Kurdish scene: in Rojava, the Öcalan movement is accused of dictatorism, it is openly hostile to the Kurdish nationalists in Iraq, hated by the Kurdish Islamists, and isolated within Iran's lively Kurdish scene.

But diplomatic-political pressure only makes sense for Turkey as long as Ankara is able to demonstrate success on the battlefield. This has been the case for several years. The prerequisite for this was a series of technical and organisational changes on the Turkish side. Starting with the use of its own combat and reconnaissance drones and the corresponding tactical and operational derivations, a reorganisation of the cooperation between intelligence and commando forces was initiated. In the meantime, fighting also takes place in and around the PKK's trench and tunnel systems in the Iraqi-Turkish border area, so that the organisation can no longer infiltrate into Turkey in large groups as it used to, let alone wage guerrilla warfare there. This explains why the Öcalan movement has for some years been following the tradition of Turkish urban guerrillas. The instrument created for this purpose, the Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH – Halkların Birleşik Devrim Hareketi), regularly attracts attention with attacks in Turkey's metropolitan regions, but has not so far been able to fulfil the PKK's expectations.

Europe

At the national level, European governments have nothing with which to oppose the political narratives of the Republic of Turkey and the PKK, and have thus lost much of their ability to shape the national and European interest. The previous European practice of banning the PKK while quietly tolerating its European elements against Turkish wishes dates from a time when the Kurdish-Turkish conflict was perceived as a problem far removed from the European sphere of responsibility. This premise no longer applies, not only because of the changed demographics of Central Europe, but also because the Syrian conflict has transformed the problem into a European question. It cannot be denied, therefore, that the Syrian parts of the Öcalan movement in AANES/Rojava have made and continue to make an important contribution to European security with their fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (DA'ESH – Daula Islamiyya fi `Iraq va Sham): namely by guarding huge refugee camps in northern Syria, where numerous European DA'ESH supporters are held.

A collapse of AANES would release thousands of DA'ESH supporters and trigger a wave of refugees to neighbouring regions and Europe. If the situation were reduced to the refugee issue, which is given priority in Europe, there would be the option of supporting Rojava through direct humanitarian aid. However, any support for Qamishli will also be understood as a stabilisation of the utopian communist project of Rojava, quite apart from the fact that it would strengthen Damascus, through which the aid deliveries would have to pass. Turkey has repeatedly rejected any move by the Europeans in this direction and describes European and American attempts to separate the Syrian Öcalan supporters from the leadership in Kandil as naïve. This contrasts with the US view that the differences of interest between Rojava and Kandil can no longer be concealed. Thus, the PKK's notorious anti-

imperialism and anti-Americanism is an anachronism of the past, given the important role the USA plays in Rojava's survival, but it is still part of the central beliefs of the leadership in the Kandil Mountains and in its European branches.

While the Turkish, Kurdish, American and Syrian positions are comprehensible in their respective logic, the Europeans have not yet developed a political vision for northern Syria or weighed up their interests and formulated the appropriate courses of action. There is no doubt that squaring the circle of conflicting interests and ideological visions is difficult. But this problem is not new and the murders in Paris have again proven its topicality. Regardless of the outcome of the French police investigation and judicial process, Europeans are urged at the security-political level to set out their shared interests for northern Syria.

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