

Europe's human rights court will slam Turkey – about time, too



Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

After a series of hesitant moves since the declaration of the emergency rule in Turkey, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) seems to have started to come to terms with the severe breaches of law.

The ECHR evaluated the situation of two of Turkey's most prominent left-liberal, reformist writers, Sahin Alpay and Mehmet Altan, who have been in detention for their critical commentary.

I am told by sources that the ECHR addressed these two political prisoners' complaints about the breach of their rights. The court on February 20 ruled that Turkey's Justice and Development Party (PKK) government was "guilty" of keeping both men in prison illegally.

Alpay has spent more than 18 months in prison, charged with "terrorist activity" and sentenced to "aggravated lifetime imprisonment." Altan has been behind bars since September 2016. He was also given an "aggravated" sentence for similar charges.

Both cases symbolise the depth of the Turkish government's hostility towards civilised dissent to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's increasingly autocratic policies.

The ECHR ruling is not yet public but it is expected to soon be announced. The only dissenting voice on the ECHR panel was that of a Turkish judge. He is serving on the panel temporarily, having been scandalously appointed to the position despite his day job as an under-secretary at the Ministry of Justice.

The ECHR ruling states what was obvious from the beginning – that there has been a severe breach of the law. The question is whether the ruling will have any effect.



Blank words. A Turkish woman poses with a blank copy of the opposition Sozcu newspaper in protest against detentions, last May. (AP)

In the case of Altan, the ECHR's opinion has shamefully come too late. Ankara can claim it is null and void because Altan is no longer a detainee. Since mid-February, he has been a convict, condemned to a lifetime in prison with no chance of parole.

In the case of Alpay, however, there may be a flicker of hope. His trial continues, with the next court hearing scheduled for April 5. This means there is a chance of securing his release. That's if quiescent international opinion and concerned friends of Turkey's peaceful fighters for democracy

and rule of law mobilise. They need to put pressure on hypocritical EU governments to seriously talk the language of law with Ankara.

Anyone with even the most minimal understanding of the rule of law is aware of the situation in Turkey. It is a grotesque parody of the trial process and it has played out over and over against hundreds of intellectuals and democratic opponents to the AKP.

Alpay's and Altan's cases have shown one further dismal truth about Turkey. The Turkish constitutional court can be ignored,

considering its ruling in favour of Altan and Alpay was defied by the lower courts. This development is the final nail in the coffin that bears the rule of law.

Turkey is not alone in its dismal plight. Across Europe, defiant strongmen are challenging key institutions, including the ECHR and the Council of Europe. It is high time we took a stance, in support of such bodies as well as the right of people to disagree with hard-line regimes.

High time, too, to speak bluntly to Turkey's AKP government. Appeasement only emboldens it.

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Divergences over Turkish incursion reflected at conference in Moscow



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In the opening of the Valdai Club conference on Russia in the Middle East, representatives from Russia, Iran and Syria denounced US policy in Syria. They portrayed Russia and Iran as fighting terrorism while US actions were characterised as supporting it.

Speakers at the meetings in Moscow agreed on their criticism of the United States but there was

an important difference among them regarding Turkey.

Bouthaina Shaaban, an adviser to Syrian President Bashar Assad, denounced Turkey's intervention in Afrin in north-western Syria. She described Ankara's actions as a violation of Syria's sovereignty and accused Turkey of facilitating the infiltration of mercenaries across the Syrian-Turkish border. She accused Turkey of not implementing the Astana agreement among Russia, Iran and Turkey on establishing de-escalation zones

in Syria.

The view of Turkey's role in Syria expressed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, though, was quite different. Both portrayed Turkey as a partner in Syria.

Lavrov pointed out that US support for Syrian Kurdish forces alienated Turkey. Ankara fears that the more powerful the Syrian Kurds grow, the more powerful separatist Kurds in Turkey will become. Zarif described Turkey's anxiety about US support for Syrian Kurdish forces as "understandable."

Moscow and Tehran, however, are reported to be apprehensive about Turkey's intervention in Syria. There have been reports that Russian forces in Syria helped transport Kurdish fighters opposing the Turkish incursion to the battlefield. However, if Moscow and Tehran share Damascus's anxiety about Turkish policy, even if not to the same degree, why would Lavrov and Zarif downplay their differences with Ankara?

One possibility is that, whatever their discomfort with Turkey's military action in Afrin, Moscow and Tehran may see the opportunity to promote a wider rift between Turkey and the United States as too tempting to forego. Because US support for the Syrian Kurds is promoting Turkish hostility towards Washington, neither Moscow nor Tehran wants to discourage this dynamic by di-

rectly confronting Turkish policy in Syria. To achieve this "greater good," Moscow and Tehran are quite willing to ignore Damascus's denunciation of Turkey's intervention.

Yet Moscow's policy has another layer of complexity, as the session on the Kurds at the conference made clear. While not directly opposing Turkey's intervention against them, Moscow appears to be competing with the United States for influence with the Syrian Kurds by arguing that they would be better protected from Turkey through allying with the Damascus regime. This, they argue, would afford Syrian Kurds better protection than relying only on US support, which they see Washington as unwilling to sustain in the long run.

Can Russia really hope to get closer to Ankara by exploiting Turkish-American differences over the Syrian Kurds while luring the Syrian Kurds away from Washington through offering them a "better" means for resisting Turkey? These aims seem contradictory.

However, as contradictory as these aims may be, it is the United States' Syria policy that has encouraged Russian hopes of achieving them. This is because the United States has supported the Syrian Kurds enough to alienate Turkey but not enough to protect them from it, thus giving both Turkey and the Syrian Kurds incentive to cooperate with Moscow.



Expert dialogue. Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Vitaly Naumkin (L) and Chairman of the Board of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club Andrey Bystritskiy attend the Valdai Club conference on Russia in the Middle East. (Valdai Discussion Club)

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