

Refugees and the hypocrisy of charity – a weekly news review

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If the proverbial Martian – a most rational creature – were to stumble on today's world, then, of all the many contradictions, one of the things they would find hardest to understand would be the creation and abuse of refugees. If our Martian had found themselves in Brussels last week, at the European Union's sixth "Conference on supporting the future of Syria and the region", they would have heard one country after another pledge financial aid to support distressed Syrians in northwest Syria and in the – much-thanked – main refugee receiving countries of Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Being intelligent as well as rational, our Martian would want to know what kind

of society turns a whole people into a charity case; who were the men and women around the conference chamber and these generous refugee hosts; and where was this money going to go to.

In pondering the nature of a society where gross cruelty is seen as unstoppable, and leaders are expected to do no more than provide first aid to the casualties, comparison could be made to capitalism itself. European countries are accustomed to operating a system where cruelties of a less immediately violent kind are accepted as inevitable, and charities are needed to pick up the pieces. They are accustomed to a system structured on hypocrisy. Charity can make the donor look, and feel good, even while they ignore, or are even responsible for, the underlying problems that make it necessary.

There were lots of obligatory comments from the donors about the need for a peaceful solution, but any hope that the EU could also be an organisation to pursue that solution would be dispersed by an examination of the list of participants. Russia was not invited – they are persona non grata because of Ukraine – however, those in attendance (who were not limited to Europe) included representatives from countries that are playing an active part in Syria's destruction, and were here posing, unchallenged, as friends.

Turkey has carried out three invasions into Syria, and occupies and controls large parts of the north. In these occupied regions, it has carried out widespread ethnic cleansing, and has put day to day control in the hands of militias that combine criminal violence with a brutal and oppressive interpretation of Islam. Every day Turkey also continues to attack, and to attempt to destabilise, the adjacent Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. As for Turkey's role as a refugee host, I will look at that in more detail later.

Iran is also active militarily in Syria, supporting the regime of President Assad while building its own power and influence; and it also encourages destabilising forces to the detriment of the Autonomous Administration.

Although the United States provides the Autonomous Administration with vital military support as part of the war against ISIS, they allowed Turkey's invasions, and they have not prevented Turkey's ceasefire breaches. They have also imposed a sanction regime over the whole of Syria – a notoriously blunt weapon that has caused economic immiseration of the Syrian population. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, who chaired the conference, stressed that 90% of people in Syria live in poverty, but also pointedly stated that they would not relax sanctions.

The problem was not only who was there, but also who wasn't. There was no representative from the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – the one part of Syria where a serious attempt is being made to build supportive and democratic social structures and to recognise women's rights. This is a region which has an estimated population of 4 to 5 million, which gave over 11,000 lives to defend Syria and the world from ISIS, and which has been building a concrete case for a federal future for the whole of Syria; but it is given no official recognition and no platform for its ideas. The main conference was preceded by a "day of dialogue" with NGOs, where emphasis was put on giving space to Syrian voices and empowering women, making the omission of voices from the Autonomous Administration all the more glaring.

\$6.7 billion was pledged by conference participants. (To put that into context, UK military spending is over \$50 billion.) The money will be used to help refugees in the main receiver countries, and also people in northwest Syria, which is under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). HTS emerged out of Al-Qaeda, though it is now an independent organisation. Turkey lists it as a terrorist organisation while at the same time working with it against the Assad regime. The Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey into Idlib is the only official border crossing still recognised by the United Nations through which UN aid agencies can bring aid directly into Syria, by-passing the Syrian regime. The first UN Security Council resolution that allowed aid to be delivered directly, and not through Damascus, was made in 2014, and recognised four border crossings, including one into the northeast. However, Russia – latterly backed by China – has used its veto to close the other crossings, and there is now no recognised direct route into the northeast. They threaten to close Bab al-Hawa too, when the resolution comes up for renewal in July, and banning

Russia from the EU conference will not have helped persuade them to keep the crossing open.

Statistics for last year show that the aid collected by the EU was mainly delivered by UN agencies and NGOs. The concern should not be that this aid is going to areas under authoritarian control – Afghanistan demonstrates the appalling human cost of stopping funds in an attempt to punish a government, and a big drop in international funding is already having catastrophic impact on health services in northwest Syria. The concern is that the aid is only going to the northwest and will not reach people desperate for help in North and East Syria or in regime held areas. And – even more importantly – that the sticking plaster of aid seems to be all that is on offer, with no sign of a realistic peace settlement.

More EU fence-sitting was on show in the Turkey Report, which was adopted by the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs later in the week. The official press release observes that the report "points to the continued deterioration of the human rights situation in Turkey" and that "over the past two years the country has consistently gone back on its commitments in relation to the [EU] accession process"; but it also records that "MEPs stress the vital importance of good EU-Turkey cooperation in foreign and security policy".

Refugee colonialism

Praise heaped on Turkey for hosting the refugees is partly a reflection of others' relief at being saved from having to do this themselves; although, as discussed, many times, its refugee deal with the EU has given Turkey powerful political leverage in exchange. However, while Turkey was enjoying being described as a generous host nation, its Syrian guests (who are technically given only temporary protection status) were finding themselves the objects of a politics of spiralling populist xenophobia, and associated violent and abusive racism. Economic stress has helped political opportunists to make migration into a major political issue. Turkey has serious economic problems that have nothing to do with migration, and, with time, the expansion of the

working-age population should be matched by a growth of new businesses, but a sudden expansion, in a capitalist system, of what Marx called “the reserve army of labour”, weakens workers’ bargaining power. When real wages are already tumbling and unemployment rising, this adds to the pressures of those struggling to find paid work. It is then easy for politicians to deflect blame for their own failed economic policies onto the incomers, who are themselves victims of this system, and offer a magical cure in their removal.

President Erdoğan has responded to the popular mood, and to the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP)’s promises to return the refugees, with his own promise of purpose-built settlements in Turkish-occupied Syria. There are already nineteen such settlements on purloined land in occupied Afrîn, and he claims to have already “returned” half a million people. Now he plans to “return” a million more. This marks a change of tone from his previous focus on Turkish generosity, but he had already advertised these ideas to the world when, shortly before his 2019 Syrian invasion, he brandished a map in the UN General Assembly showing a 30km deep Turkish-controlled “safe zone” across the north of Syria, where he claimed he could settle 2-3 million Syrian refugees. Sêrekaniyê [Ras al-Ayn] and Girê Spî [Tell Abyad], which Turkey captured and occupied the following month, are included in his current settlement plans. Erdoğan has stressed that “returns” are and will be voluntary, but there are too many existing examples of illegal practices for this to be credible.

Settling refugees in occupied areas isn’t a return, in that the people being sent did not come from these areas. The people who once lived there were pushed out as they fled Turkey’s own invasion and occupation, and they have become Internally Displaced People in other parts of Syria.

The settlements being built are funded by Islamic charities from places such as Qatar and Kuwait (which both attended the EU Conference), but Germany under Angela Merkel showed support for these ideas in the past. It is possible that money from the EU fund could be used to support Turkey’s resettlement plans, even if not directly. The head of the EU delegation to Turkey commented on Monday, “We all will be happy if Syrian refugees go

back to their country in a dignified voluntary manner under auspices of the UN", but that, "Today, not all conditions are united for big-scale return." And America's ambassador to the UN told the civil society groups in Brussels that conditions do not currently exist for safe dignified voluntary return. However, neither Borrell, nor UN Special Envoy, Geir Otto Pedersen, chose to mention or comment on Turkey's plans when they addressed the EU conference.

From within the region, Turkey's resettlement plans have produced a plethora of negative reactions. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has described them as a colonial project, aimed at altering the demographic structure, and has said that they should be prohibited by international bodies. North Press Agency reports anger in Raqqa from tribal sheikhs, and local activists; anger among people displaced from Sêrikaniyê as a consequence of Turkey's invasion, who hope to return to live in Sêrikaniyê themselves; and anger by Syriac parties, who are staging a two day protest against the plans in Qamishli. Georgette Barsoumo, of the Syriac Women's Union, told their reporter, "This area is characterised by the civilizations of the peoples who have inhabited it for thousands of years. Turkey now is trying to change its identity."

Lifting US sanctions

I have mentioned the economic devastation caused by the sanctions imposed on Syria. On Thursday, the United States made a much-delayed announcement that these would be lifted for most of the areas not controlled by the Syrian Regime, though the population under Assad's rule will continue to suffer. The area that will be free of sanctions does not exactly align with the boundary of government control, and sanctions will still affect Turkish occupied Afrîn (though not other Turkish occupied areas) and the autonomous region of Shehba, where many of the families who escaped from Afrîn live in conditions of extreme hardship. Sanctions will also still apply to the import of oil into the United States. The lifting of sanctions will allow foreign investment into the region, and has been widely welcomed as facilitating desperately needed economic and physical reconstruction; but it will also make it harder for the Autonomous Administration to control the

nature of their economy, and to ensure that it serves the community rather than the interests of business.

More trouble in Al-Hol

Meanwhile, there remains a huge and unmet need for help in dealing with the most problematic of displaced people, the ISIS families housed in Al Hol camp. A few foreign women and children have been repatriated, and those families from northeast Syria who are not thought to be implicated in atrocities have been sent back to their home areas under the watch of local leaders. But the greater part of this “ticking time bomb” remains, and a generation of children are growing up with a lethal mix of physical hardship and violent Islamist indoctrination. International authorities have shown no serious intent to address the problem, either in the long term or as regards immediate needs.

Despite the dangers of a camp that a hard core of inmates have attempted to turn into a microcosm of the so-called Islamic State, much essential work in the everyday running of Al Hol falls on NGOs. This week, NGOs suspended activities, other than the supply of water, after camp residents attacked the offices of the Norwegian Refugee Council, stealing electronics and threatening workers. In another part of the camp, cars belonging to another NGO were pelted with stones.

Turkey's war in Syria and Iraq

Today, I have concentrated on refugees and displaced people, but other attacks against Kurdish freedoms and against democracy continue unabated, and Erdoğan has been threatening more. Turkish attacks in Syria have included a fatal drone strike on Kobanê; and, on Friday, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) issued a press release reporting a large-scale rocket and artillery attack by Turkey and its mercenaries that had affected over fifty villages. They observed “The Turkish occupation deliberately targeted densely populated villages, civilian farms, towns, and cities at peak times and rush hours to intimidate civilians, preventing them from continuing their work.” This attack followed Turkish accusations of SDF shelling across the border, which the

SDF has described as a Turkish false flag operation to justify their aggression. Certainly, there is no reason why SDF defenders would deliberately take the risk of a cross border attack.

Fierce fighting also continues in the northern Iraqi mountains, between Turkish invasion forces and the PKK guerrillas. Turkey has been using paramilitary village guards alongside its soldiers, and has been reported to be supplementing ground and air attacks with use of chemical weapons. The guerrillas claim to have brought down a Turkish helicopter.

In northwest Iraq, the Yazidis in Şengal have been protesting against attempts to take away their hard-won autonomy; and the Şengal Democratic Autonomous Assembly has accused the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of claiming to negotiate on their behalf.

Turkey's war at home

In Turkey, there have been house raids and detentions of activists in Kızıltepe, Şırnak, and Amed. The Kobanê Trial, against the Peoples Democratic Party (HDP), continues to defy both logic and legal procedure, and Xalîde, a traditional Dengbêj singer who works at the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre in Istanbul, was beaten by police and taken into custody.

This week also brought a further reality check for any opposition politician tempted to believe that state oppression would stop at the HDP. The Court of Cassation has confirmed a sentence of four years and eleven months for the head of the CHP in İstanbul. Canan Kaftancıoğlu is credited with an important role in the CHP's victory in the 2019 İstanbul mayoral elections, which ended a quarter-century reign by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its antecedents. A trawl through her twitter posts demonstrated that she also had a soft spot for human rights, and that September, she was given five custodial sentences – adding up to 9 years and 8 months – on the basis of her tweets. The Appeals Court upheld her sentences, and now the Court of Causation has upheld three of the five, and given her a political ban.

Depressingly, even the CHP rally in support of Kaftancıoğlu introduced a disparaging reference to refugees.

More international hypocrisy

I began with the hypocrisy of international aid, and I will end with two examples of the hypocrisy of European law. A carefully put together case asking the German Interior Ministry to reconsider the terrorist listing of the PKK appears to have been dismissed out of hand. The lawyers will now take it to court.

And on Friday, we learnt that a Belgian court had acquitted the four men accused of the attempted assassination of two leading Kurdish politicians in Brussels in 2017. Evidence linked the case to a network of assassination and espionage, including the 2013 murder of three Kurdish women activists, Sakine Cansız, Fidan Doğan and Leyla Şaylemez, in Paris. Lawyer Jan Firman, has described the decision as purely political. They will need to examine the detailed ruling before deciding how to pursue the case.

Finally – another political sting. News coming in suggests that Kurds in Sweden and Finland could be facing difficulties from their governments as Erdoğan prepares to talk about what it would take to persuade Turkey to allow the Nordic nations to join NATO.

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