

A tale of two genocides – a weekly news review

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[“I don’t know how I will tell her](#) that she will not be able to play with her friends. I don’t know how she will be convinced that she lost her brother Muhammad while they were playing...”

[“The nature and severity of the damage](#) inflicted on civilian infrastructure critical to essential services... cannot be understated. The scale of damage far supersedes the capacity of the humanitarian community to sustain emergency life-saving service provision. There were already significant gaps in water, power, and fuel prior to the early October escalations. Now with major infrastructure offline and a near-complete reliance on provision of emergency stop-gap measures to sustain life and livelihood... there are no

sustainable options other than support for major rehabilitations... [I]f significant civilian infrastructural damage is not addressed, no further escalation is required for the situation to worsen from dire to catastrophic.”

“[\[T\]he local power plant has also stopped working](#). Without power, water and sewage systems have also been shut down, leaving residents without access to water. In these conditions, hospitals, already collapsing as they are inundated with the wounded, are barely able to function... residents are living a terrifying nightmare: relentless air strikes against which there is no defense; a total collapse of infrastructure; entire residential neighborhoods wiped out; hundreds of thousands displaced, many of whom no longer have homes to return to; no power, water, food or medicine.

“[A bereaved... father](#) cries in pain over his two children, killed by an... airstrike while they were filling jars of water for their family”

These four quotes are all from this week, but from two different parts of the Middle East. The last two are from Gaza. The first two are from North and East Syria and describe the impact of Turkey’s continuing campaign to make life there unliveable – a campaign that barely scraped a mention from international politicians and mainstream media even before Israel-Palestine blew everything else off the international agenda. Turkey’s attacks on North and East Syria have not matched the immediate intensity and scale of the lethal violence that Israel has rained down on Gaza, but their intended result and many of their methods are the same.

When President Erdoğan [claimed outrage](#) at Israel’s targeting of electricity and water supplies, places of worship, hospitals, and schools, and asked “what about human rights?” he knew what he was talking about because his army had been doing the same things in North and East Syria. When Turkey’s foreign minister, Hakan Fidan, [highlighted](#) how Israel has driven Palestinians from their land, he could have been describing Turkey’s ethnic cleansing of the areas they have occupied in northern Syria: “You occupy someone’s land. Not only do you occupy it, you take over their houses, you demolish them, you kick them out. And then you bring in somebody else and you come up with a term for them ‘settlers’. This is what we call theft.”

When Erdoğan [shared an image](#) of himself holding up the maps showing Israel's increasing encroachment over Palestinian land, it was a distorted echo of his [display of the map of Syria at the General Assembly of the United Nations](#) in 2019. That Syrian map showed the 30km strip of predominantly Kurdish Syrian land over which he demands control, and part of which his forces subsequently invaded. At another display of his Syrian map he claimed that "Kurdish lifestyle is not suitable for these places".

Turkish attacks on Syria

Turkey has kept up continuous low-level attacks and targeted assassinations since their 2019 invasion. They have not invaded again because America and Russia refuse to move their forces out of the way, but they have not been prevented from air attacks and from shelling across the border, and between the 5 and 9 October, their attacks were intensive. The impact of those attacks has now been [documented](#): 11 power stations hit, affecting over two million people; 18 water stations out of service; 2 hospitals destroyed; 48 educational sites hit, three industrial facilities out of service, and 44 people killed. The repair bill for the power plants alone will run to tens of millions of dollars. Daily attacks continue, and Turkey has made clear that they are determined to destroy the Autonomous Administration, which is home to some five million people. They promise more and worse to come.

Worse to come

The same day (9 October) that Erdoğan [chastised Israel](#) for "seizing [Palestinian] homes and lands, destroying their infrastructure, and preventing their development", he also further threatened the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. After claiming that the PKK is synonymous with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that protect North and East Syria, he [stated](#) that "It is Turkey's legitimate right to continue its cross-border operations and conduct intelligence activities at the global level until it completely eliminates the PKK, with all its names and extensions [meaning the SDF etc]. We will continue to carry out operations against the terrorist

organization and the places under its control with more determination, more violence and more effectively.”

On Tuesday, the Turkish parliament [approved a presidential](#) memorandum that allows Turkish armed forces to carry out cross border operations in Syria and Iraq for another two years. The memorandum claims to be a response to terrorism threats, to “the unjustified unilateral separatist attempts in the regions adjacent to Turkey’s southern land borders and possible developments related to them”, and to “other possible risks such as mass migration”. It refers to “Terrorist organizations, especially PKK/PYD-YPG and DAESH”. The YPG, or People’s Defence Units, are the Kurdish forces that defended North and East Syria against ISIS and are now incorporated into the SDF. The PYD, or Democratic Union Party, is the main political party in North and East Syria. They are both distinct organisations from the PKK. The inclusion of Daesh/ISIS would appear to be for international credibility, as Turkey has repeatedly been shown to be aiding ISIS rather than fighting them. The only parties that voted against the memorandum were the pro-Kurdish leftist Peoples’ Equality and Democracy Party (HEDEP) – which is the renamed Green Left and effectively the continuation of the HDP – and the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). However, the [CHP did not criticise](#) the main part of the memorandum, only the section that also allowed foreign troops into Turkey.

“Terrorism” or war crimes

Both Israel and Turkey are attempting to erase a whole people, and are doing so under the guise of combating terrorism. The Hamas attack, with its mass civilian deaths, has no parallel from the defenders of North and East Syria – nor, incidentally, from the PKK – but Israel’s attack on the Palestinians would not end if Hamas were removed from the equation. In the West Bank, where Hamas are not in control, as they are in Gaza, Israeli security forces and Jewish settlers have [killed at least 73 Palestinians](#) in the last two weeks.

Both the PKK and Hamas are listed by most Western countries as terrorist organisations, suggesting a false equivalence, but, as has been shown

multiple times, terrorist listing is a political decision with little relationship to legal argument. Terrorism, as generally understood, is a very different thing from how governments choose to define and use the term. For those of us who have long been arguing that it is a dangerous labelling that only serves as a tool for political discrimination and repression, it has been refreshing to see this debate brought out into the open in discussions over the [BBC's avoidance](#) of the term, except when quoting the views of others, and in the stance taken by La France Insoumise, the leftist opposition here in France. The French politicians [argue](#) that a group should be judged by their actions rather than simply be labelled as evil, and that Hamas and Israel are at war and should both be judged for war crimes. Sadly, although the discussion is refreshing, the responses have been depressing. The principled stand taken by La France Insoumise against the uncritical support for Israel shown by France's other main parties, has been met by ostracism, abuse, and death threats. The party's deputies have been labelled as terrorists and anti-Semites, as well as that favourite term of abuse from the French establishment, Islamo-leftists.

The role of the West

In both Israel-Palestine and North and East Syria, the United States and other Western nations are complicit in what is happening. The West's disastrous meddling goes back more than a hundred years, but there is enough to convict them in what is happening now, without going way back into history.

America's unconditional support for Israel, which is parroted by Europe, comes out of their own self-interest, as President Biden has himself [made clear](#). In a 1986 interview, then Senator Biden stressed, "were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region." This July, Biden repeated the same point.

The United States has continued supporting Israel through everything that Israel has done: occupation, illegal settlements, mass punishment of civilians, imposition of what is increasingly recognised as apartheid, and mass political imprisonment. They supported Israel while Israel derailed opportunities for peace with secular Palestinian leaders; and, according to American diplomatic

cables exposed by Wikileaks, [many people believed](#) that Israel deliberately encouraged the emergence of Hamas in 1988 in order to divide the Palestinians and weaken the intifada. While the cable notes that the evidence was not conclusive, Hamas, unlike other organisations, was free to openly distribute leaflets and give interviews, and it was reported that known collaborators with Israel had been seen with Hamas supporters.

Hamas was banned by Israel in 1989, after abducting and killing two soldiers, but another cable [noted](#) that Israel's detention/expulsion of secular nationalists had left room for "young toughs" to be attracted to Hamas. When Hamas was taking control of Gaza in 2007, Israel's director of military intelligence [told the American Ambassador](#) that this would please Israel as they could then treat Gaza as a hostile country. This is exactly what Israel has done, blighting the lives of Gaza's citizens – all without losing American support.

Again for reasons of self-interest, the United States and Europe have consistently backed Turkey, even selling Turkey arms while they were attacking their own Kurdish citizens and driving them from their villages. Turkey is an important and strategically placed NATO ally that no one wants to offend and push into the Russian camp. From a European perspective, Turkey also serves as a receiver of refugees who might otherwise make their way into the European Union, which pays Turkey to accommodate them, and Turkey is also an important trading partner.

The United States in Syria

However, an accident of history has resulted in the United States having a tactical alliance with the SDF in the fight against ISIS. America's initial intervention into Syria was in support of the Islamist militias that were attempting to bring down the government, but America's 2003 invasion of Iraq had created the chaos that gave birth to ISIS, and when ISIS threatened to dominate the whole region, America looked for a new partner that was capable of taking on this new threat. The only option was the Kurds. While the Kurds fought on the ground, and lost many men and women doing so, America provided air support. They are still working together to root out ISIS

sleeper cells. The United States has made clear that their support only extends to the fight against ISIS, but the presence of their small contingent of 900 troops provides a barrier to a Turkish land invasion.

Turkey's last invasion into Syria, in 2019, took place after President Trump withdrew US forces from the area, and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria is only too aware of the deterrent role those forces play. However, links with America have their own risks. The Autonomous Administration tries to use the, albeit limited, protection provided by the American presence to strengthen their position in negotiations with President Assad and his Syrian regime, but Assad has so far proved reluctant to consider any decentralisation of power. Meanwhile, regional dynamics are changing quickly, and America's support for Israel makes US bases themselves into targets. During the last few days, US bases in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen have been [hit by missiles](#), and Iran-backed militias have threatened further attacks. With Iran, Syria, and Iraq working increasingly closely together and in opposition to the United States, the Autonomous Administration could find itself caught in the middle.

A world divided

Most people outwith the Kurdish community are not aware of what Turkey has been doing in Syria, but the world is watching Gaza. The failure of Western leaders to call out the genocide being carried out by Israel against the Palestinians has served to further alienate Western governments from the governments and people of the global South (apart from Islamophobic India), and also from their own populations. (A poll conducted on Thursday [found that](#), while party leaders refuse to call for a ceasefire, an immediate ceasefire would be supported by 76% of British adults.) The actions of Western leaders are not just putting a further nail in the coffin of US hegemony. They are an incitement to war and to ethnic and religious divisions that can feed equally reactionary forms of anti-Westernism.

Kurds are, perforce, especially aware of the contradictory forces at play. The Kurdish Freedom Movement supports, and relates to, the Palestinian struggle for freedom, and can comfortably march alongside Turkish leftists. However,

when supporting the Palestinian cause, they find themselves also alongside those who would treat them the same way that Israel treats the Palestinians. These people are not so much interested in freedom, as in the triumph of Islam. I'm not talking about the many Palestinian and other Muslims who are genuinely struggling for freedom and reject violence against civilians whether committed by Israel or Hamas. Most Kurds, like most Palestinians, are Muslim. I am referring to those who deliberately try and use the Palestinian freedom struggle to create a wider "clash of civilisations" and whose interpretation of Islam allows no space for those with diverging views: people who, in many ways, are the mirror image of Western supremacists.

The brutality of Israel's attack on Gaza and attempt to dehumanise the Palestinians appears even more shocking coming from descendants of a people who were themselves dehumanised, oppressed, and massacred. But the actions of the Israeli state – which, of course, does not represent all Jews – provide a dreadful lesson that people from any group can become oppressors or victims depending on the circumstances. There have been prominent protests by Jews who are appalled at what Israel is doing in their name; but Israel also provides a warning that a group cannot find true freedom through creating their own nation state, as that only makes new relationships of dominance. The "two state solution" supported by the United Nations could give Palestinians land and greater security, which are no small things, but each state would still have its own minorities.

Öcalan's alternative

For an example of a society that has tried to avoid these relationships of dominance and prejudice against minority groups, we can turn to the society that Turkey is trying to destroy in North and East Syria. Full involvement of people of different ethnicities and religions is deliberately encouraged at all levels of their bottom-up democracy, alongside full involvement of women. This has become a fundamental principle of the Kurdish Movement that follows the Ideas of Abdullah Öcalan, and was also exemplified last Sunday at the congress of the Green Left – now HEDEP. HEDEP chose as its new leaders a Kurdish man and an Arab Alevi woman, Tülay Hatimoğulları. She [told Mezopotamya Agency](#) that the Kurdish Struggle teaches people from other

groups to similarly demand their cultural rights and question their assimilation into the mainstream.

Getting the balance right between enjoying cultural difference, and hardening distinctions is never easy, but the success of the approach in North and East Syria is demonstrated daily in the relationships between people from different groups. Whether this can last will depend on whether outside forces, such as Turkey, are allowed to complete the region's destruction.

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