

Campaigning under the shadow of Gaza – a weekly news review

It is even harder campaigning for Kurdish rights when the world is focussed on Palestinian. But these should be mutually supportive anti-colonial struggles. Together, they can expose hypocrisy and Western complicity, counter government bans against activism, cut across attempts to sow division, and expose the exploitation of religion and its use to hide political ambitions. Abdullah Öcalan's ideas provide a way forward for both struggles, and the autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has begun to develop these ideas into a model society, but help is needed to protect it from destruction.

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Israel's genocide of the people of Gaza is so big, so brutal, and so blatant that it is difficult to focus on anything else, but other problems have not gone away, and can even be made worse as a consequence of these attacks. How, then, should the Kurdish Freedom Movement campaign in such circumstances?

Those struggling for life and liberty in the four parts of Kurdistan continue to face forces that can threaten their very existence. We cannot put our support for that struggle on hold, nor would it help anyone for us to do so. In fact, support for each struggle works to support the other too.

Anticolonial struggles

Although people on all sides are trying to present what is happening in Palestine as a religious battle or as a war between East and West, it is essentially [a struggle for freedom and against colonialism](#), and so part of the same struggle as that being wage by the Kurds. Every time a colonising and oppressive power gets away with acts of aggression it takes its aggression further, and other powers are emboldened to do the same. Conversely opposition to one oppressive power can help discourage others, and solidarity between anticolonial struggles – and other struggles too – is the only thing strong enough to overcome the vested interests of the people in power.

For their own reasons, some external powers will try to pose as friends of some of those being oppressed – as Turkey is doing with respect to the Palestinians – but that makes it all the more important to build links and solidarity between peoples who are struggling on the ground – solidarity that can expose the hypocrisy and manipulation of the different exploiting powers.

Exposing Western complicity

In both Palestine and Kurdistan, America and European countries are complicit in the oppression – not only doing nothing to challenge it, but actively supporting it, including supplying the weapons used. When Craig Mokhiber, Director of the New York office of the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, resigned in protest at the UN's failure to act to protect the Palestinians, he [set out the situation](#) very clearly. "This is a text-book case of

genocide. The European, ethno-nationalist, settler colonial project in Palestine has entered its final phase, toward the expedited destruction of the last remnants of indigenous Palestinian life in Palestine. What's more, the governments of the United States, the United Kingdom, and much of Europe, are wholly complicit in the horrific assault. Not only are these governments refusing to meet their treaty obligations 'to ensure respect' for the Geneva Conventions, but they are in fact actively arming the assault, providing economic and intelligence support, and giving political and diplomatic cover for Israel's atrocities."

In Turkey's case it is even easier for the Western powers to ignore Turkey's war crimes and to continue to work with their NATO ally. Turkey may be carrying out unprovoked invasions, targeting civilian infrastructure, implementing ethnic cleansing, and using chemical weapons, but little of this is registered by mainstream media. Which makes it all the more important that activists continue to publicise what is happening. Both struggles can campaign together to expose and resist Western complicity.

One way that Western powers give support to Israel and to Turkey is to restrict and outlaw protests against Israel and Turkey's actions and in support of the struggles by Palestinians and Kurds. Protests for peace and against state violence are branded as supporting terrorism and encouraging unrest. If they criticise Israel, they are also branded as antisemitic. This is part of a much wider clampdown on civil liberties as liberal democracies blunder into the crisis of late capitalism, and has to be resisted jointly by all who value our hard-won freedoms. Thursday's ban by the German government of the organisation that campaigns for Palestinian political prisoners, Samidoun, will seem only too familiar to Kurdish organisations that have faced endless restrictions and harassment by the German state. As Samidoun [points out](#), "If it is possible to ban Samidoun, then it is possible to ban every political organization and group in Germany that challenges the politics of the German state and its imperialist role." This is just one example among many.

Cutting across divide and rule

Governments complicit in oppression don't want to see a solidarity of resistance. They try and encourage divisions that obscure the underlying inequalities and exploitation: East versus West, Moslems versus Jews and Christians, good versus evil. These divisions are stoking new prejudices and even violence. Solidarity combined with an understanding of the different ongoing struggles is needed to cut across these dangerous divisions.

Hamas was able to rise to prominence in Gaza because Israel regarded it as a useful tool for dividing the Palestinians. Now Israel is using every brutal detail of the Hamas attack (including details that have since been questioned) to try and portray all Palestinians as evil and to frighten others from showing empathy with the Palestinians' situation. However, the aim of Israeli leaders extends well beyond the destruction of Hamas, to encompass the genocide and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, as has been made manifest both in Israel's destruction of Gaza and [pogroms in the West Bank](#), and in the [unashamed fascist speeches](#) of Israeli politicians.

[Videos](#) of Israeli citizens and soldiers mocking the situation of the people in Gaza are the pit of cruelty, but they are not unique. Some members of any group of people can be persuaded to mock others in this way. In Turkey, hate and contempt is focused on the Kurds, and, as in Israel, this is encouraged from above and endemic in the political structure.

Countering the exploitation of religion

Attempts by different leaders to recruit the power of religion in support of their ambitions have also reached a new low and need to be unmasked by a strong unified resistance. Last Saturday, Benjamin Netanyahu [invoked the biblical injunction](#) to "remember what the Amalek has done to you". In the books of Deuteronomy and Samuel the Amalek appear as the nemesis of the ancient Israelites, attacking them as they were escaping from Egypt, and God insists that they must be utterly destroyed. He tells Saul, through Samuel, to exact revenge and "Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!" Historically, many rabbis have

chosen to interpret this injunction as [metaphor](#), but in Netanyahu's case it describes only too closely the nature of his army's attacks on the people of Gaza.

Netanyahu's weaponizing of religion is backed by some of the country's right-wing religious leaders, and 45 rabbis have written a [letter](#) claiming that it is religiously acceptable to bomb hospitals. Before moving on to look at Turkey, I want to stress that there are many Jews, religious and not religious, who are appalled by what is happening in their name, though in Israel itself it is becoming [increasingly difficult](#) to raise any opposition to the government narrative.

The same day that Netanyahu recalled biblical vengeance, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [addressed a vast crowd](#) in Istanbul in his self-appointed role as defender of the Muslim ummah. While demonstrations in support of the Palestinians that were held in other countries were mottled with the Palestinian colours of red, green, white, and black, the Istanbul demonstration was a sea of red Turkish flags. This was an opportunity for Erdoğan to put his Islamist stamp on Turkey and to rally his faithful supporters. As many commentators have observed, it was a deliberate eclipsing of Turkey's hundredth anniversary celebrations the next day, which centred the republic's secular first leader, Atatürk. Duran Kalkan, one of the senior commanders of the PKK, [described](#) the event as "like an election rally for the mayor of Istanbul". With the mass crowd echoing his words, Erdoğan encouraged people's righteous anger against the brutalities being meted out on the Palestinians in Gaza, and against the hypocrisy of the United States and Europe, who talk about Human Rights, Democracy, and Justice while supporting Israel's attacks. And he added a religious framing with a rhetorical question to the Western states: "Do you want to start a Crescent-Crusader war again?" He also gave a further demonstration of his ability to match Western hypocrisy.

Exposing hypocrisy

Turkey has not stopped providing a conduit for the export of Azerbaijan oil to Israel – oil that supplies 40% of Israeli needs – and all the things that they accuse Israel of, they have themselves perpetrated against the Kurds. For last Saturday's demonstration, Erdoğan exploited the Palestinian cause to direct popular anger onto his favourite objects of hate. He told the angry crowd that the PKK and YPG (together with the movement founded by his own former collaborator, Fetullah Gülen) are supported by the West, and also by Israel, who "gives money, weapons and arms". This baseless calumny was taken up and amplified by his supporters, and parts of the Turkish media published [wild assertions](#) that the "US-led PKK" were being recruited as a proxy force to fight for Israel.

Even if the PKK had resources to spare from defending themselves against the second largest armed forces in NATO, they would not be using them to support Israel's war against the Palestinians. The United States, Britain, and the European Union include the PKK on their prescribed terrorism lists, and Netanyahu has also [described](#) them as a terrorist organisation. America has put bounties on the heads of Kalkan and the other two main PKK leaders, and Mossad is believed to have been involved, with the CIA, in the abduction of the PKK's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in 1999. PKK fighters trained with the Palestinians in the 1980s and died fighting against Israel's invasion of Lebanon. And, as Kalkan reminds us, the PKK "defend the just cause of the Palestinian people until the end".

It should be clear by now that supporting the rights of the Palestinians does not have to mean supporting Hamas, despite attempts by Western leaders and media to make it seem so. In the view of Öcalan himself, as [expressed to his lawyers](#) in December 2009, "Hamas' war is only for power. It uses Islam for the interests of its own power. I am not praising Israel here. Everyone already knows my views and opinions about Israel... It is the same with the AKP... They have nothing to do with real Islam."

The Justice and Development Party, or AKP, is Erdoğan's party, and the ruling party in Turkey. While the Kurdish Freedom Movement tries to create a system that is inclusive of people of all religions and none, the AKP government imposes a conservative Islamism. They then use this to portray themselves as defenders of the faith, and to portray those who think differently – such as members of the pro-Kurdish leftist HDP (now the Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party, HEDEP) – as infidels. HDP or HEDEP members who are also religious Muslims – such as the former MP, Hüda Kaya, who was arrested last week – disrupt this simple logic and are treated with especial resentment. HEDEP [claim](#) that Kaya was arrested because of her “principled stance against the government's efforts to control and dominate religious affairs”.

Öcalan's alternative

The Kurdish Freedom Movement also has a very specific contribution to make to the Palestinian struggle and the possibility of a peaceful solution. In line with the ideas elaborated by Öcalan, they argue that a way of living can be found not in hierarchical state structures but in radical bottom-up democracy that deliberately accommodates different ethnicities and religions. This is what the Kurdish movement is struggling for in Kurdistan, and they are offering these ideas to the world. In return, they need help in protecting them.

Defending Öcalan's model

These are the ideas that have inspired attempts to build a new society in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria: a society which should serve as a model, but which Turkey is very deliberately trying to destroy.

I have already written quite a bit about [Turkey's bombing of North and East Syria's infrastructure](#), early in October. A [new article](#) by Ali Ali & Lucas Chapman for the Kurdish Centre for Studies includes interviews with some of the people in areas most badly hit, giving a terrifying picture both of the immediate impact of the attacks, and of their long-term legacy in the physical and mental destruction of society. They describe an Arab family searching for the severed head of their father, a child rendered mute for four days from fear, a traumatised mother who didn't recognise her own children, and the loss of

livelihoods and of hope. The major attacks have stopped – for now – but smaller scale attacks continue, along with fear and uncertainty.

And it isn't only Turkey that wants to destabilise the Autonomous Administration. Both Assad's Syrian Government and their allied Iran-backed militias want to weaken it too. Assad wants to force the region to come back under his centralised control, and Iran wants to increase their own growing influence. Both want to force the exit of American forces that are allied to North and East Syria's Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the battle against ISIS.

Last Sunday, Deir ez-Zor again became a focus of Syrian Government and Iranian-backed [attacks](#) on the SDF, with fighters infiltrating across the Euphrates.

Iranian-backed groups have also been terrorising residents and [causing chaos](#) in the Aleppo district of Ashrafiyeh, which is part of the Autonomous Administration although physically separated from the rest. And there have been reports of drone and rocket attacks by Iran affiliated groups on US bases in Syria and Iraq, and of US retaliatory airstrikes – encouraging fears of further escalation.

In Iraq, Makhmour camp, which was founded by refugees who left Turkey in the 1990s, is also run according to Öcalan's ideas. Camp residents have been protesting against a new agreement by the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to divide control of the former PKK bases near the camp between them. The residents are worried about the presence of KDP peshmerga, which have become closely tied to Turkey.

Wednesday was [Kobanê Day](#), celebrating the ninth anniversary of North and East Syria's fight back against ISIS. A lot has happened in those nine years. Initial successes and hopes have been increasingly crushed by Turkey, whose attacks, in the words of HEDEP, "aim to finish what ISIS failed to do". But even after Turkey's recent wholesale destruction of the region, people are continuing the painstaking work of building their society. Last week saw a

bookfair in Qamishli and literary festivals in Qamishli and Kobanê. Life and resistance goes on.

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