

Turkey's war on the environment – a weekly news review

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Sarah Glynn

If the first casualty of war is truth, then the second is probably the environment – especially when the aggressor is Turkey. This is not collateral damage. It is deliberate.

This week, we saw photographs of Turkey's destruction of forests in the mountains of South (Iraqi) Kurdistan. The images have even angered politicians in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and in the Government of Iraq who otherwise seem unbothered by Turkey's creeping occupation of their country. The Agricultural Ministries in Hewlêr (Erbil) and Baghdad issued a joint statement condemning the deforestation, which read,

“It is a hostile attitude towards all peoples living in the region. We ask the Turkish government to stop this immediately. We urge international institutions and organisations, especially the UN, to step in as soon as possible.”

Kurdish politicians can't ignore the public outrage at the destruction of Kurdistan's nature, but the official statement given by the KRG spokesperson pretends to an extraordinary detachment from the war itself. When the PKK held back ISIS from the gates of Hewlêr in 2014, the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) thanked them as brothers. Today, the PKK is struggling to hold back an invasion by the second biggest army in NATO, which fights under a president who publicly dreams of a neo-Ottoman empire. And the KRG spokesperson blames the PKK's very presence for Turkey's invasion, calling on them, along with Turkey, to 'respect the sovereignty of the region'. The PKK has been based in these mountains since the early 1980s, when the KDP peshmerga were also resistance fighters and the region was still to gain its autonomy. Now, it seems that the KDP are so keen to see them gone they would rather have Kurdistan's mountains occupied by a nation that oppresses the Kurds within its borders and has proved itself a ruthless exploiter of Kurdish land in Syria.

The Faustian pact between the Barzani clan's KDP and Turkey is well known. Their oil deal gives Turkey huge economic leverage over South Kurdistan, and the KDP have welcomed thousands of Turkish troops and dozens of Turkish military bases into the region. This is far from the first time that an invading power has been able to exploit the personal ambitions of powerful figures in lands they intend to occupy, and the price of the KDP's Turkish friendship could eliminate all that the Kurds have achieved in their struggle for self-determination.

While some KDP politicians protest the loss of the trees (and also protest that Turkey is mining the region's coal and transporting it across the border), it seems that others should not be surprised by what is happening. Politic Press reported that the Turkish Consul General in Hewler (Erbil), visited the KDP Deputy Speaker of Parliament and told him “It is not right for you to react to us this way. We bought the lands where we are currently stationed. We have also

bought the sites where our military bases are located. We have an agreement on this issue. The publications and propaganda disseminated through the press in Bashur are not correct. We build roads in places where we bought lands. We cut down trees where we need to do so for road construction.” (It has been reported that a contractor working for the Turkish military has already built a road 74km into Iraq.) Mezopotamya News Agency reports claims that a leading KDP member is personally involved through his companies in cutting the timber and exporting it to Turkey.

At the same time, Turkey’s aerial attacks in the mountains have destroyed orchards and vineyards, crops, beehives, and livestock – and thousands of acres have been burned. As the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) report, ‘many of Turkey’s aerial and artillery strikes have directly targeted civilians’. Dozens of villages have been emptied as their residents are forced to evacuate. When the CPT launched their report, their spokesperson observed, “We are very worried that what is happening now is not just an operation that will finish very soon. We are very worried and afraid that this is an attempt to occupy the border of Kurdistan”.

In a television interview on Tuesday, Turkish President Erdoğan made another threat to attack Maxmour refugee camp, some 180 km beyond their border with Iraq. The 13,000 residents are all families that escaped Turkey’s destruction of their villages in the 1990s, when hundreds and thousands of Kurds were driven from their homes and land, and they run the camp according to the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan. Although the camp is recognised by the United Nations, it has been under siege by the KDP authorities for almost two years.

Will the attack on Kurdistan’s beloved mountains wake people sufficiently for them to see through the obscuring narratives of the KDP so as to recognise that they are indeed facing an invasion and occupation – and that this won’t stop at the border areas? Politicians from other parties have expressed concern about the direction of Kurdistan’s politics, but the political system as a whole is mired in corruption and reliant on increasingly heavy control of free speech.

If they needed any more evidence for Turkey's intentions, the politicians could talk to the people of Afrîn, Serekaniye, and Girê Spî. These areas were all invaded by Turkey under the pretence of protecting their border with Syria, and now they are being ethnically cleansed and Turkified. Afrîn was known for its olives, orchards and forests. In three years of Turkish occupation, over a million trees have been destroyed. This is pillage – a mixture of grabbing booty quickly before others can get it, of short-termist exploitation, and of a vindictive destruction of all that a defeated people hold dear.

The same pillage mentality is apparent in North Kurdistan – the Kurdish areas within Turkey's borders that the Turkish government treats as an internal colony. On Mount Cudi in Şirnak, which has been linked to the biblical story of Noah, the cutting down of trees on grounds of 'security' has been going on for a year, and there are claims that 400 tons of wood have been removed in a day. The MP for Şirnak, Hasan Özgüneş of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), has observed that where cutting is not possible artillery rounds have been used to start fires that are left to burn unchecked. When local people try and extinguish them, they are stopped. He explains that this should be understood as deliberate destruction to make the area infertile and drive away Kurds who have returned to villages destroyed in the 1990s.

Similar destruction has accompanied recent military operations in the Lice district of Amed (Diyarbakir), where trees are still being uprooted. Forest burning is a regular occurrence in North Kurdistan, as an environmental activist explained to Firat News Agency: "From Cudi to Besta and from Bitlis to Dersim, forests are destroyed and burned for months... Normally, local residents try to extinguish the fire with their own means, but this is usually obstructed by the authorities."

In Uludere, which is also in Şirnak, the Turkish army's military operations and restrictions are forcing villagers to sell their flocks and are destroying the habitats of the honeybees that provide a major source of income.

And, for several years, a nature reserve close to Lake Van has been used by the Turkish police for gas bomb training, threatening both wildlife and human residents.

In neoliberal Turkey, big commercial enterprises take precedence over both local people and the natural environment, especially in Kurdish areas. This was demonstrated last week when protestors against a marble quarry, also in Van district, were met with live ammunition.

The greatest environmental destruction has been that associated with Turkey's huge dam projects, which have enforced major ecological and social change in North Kurdistan. These dams are about more than power generation and water retention (primarily for the benefit of other parts of Turkey). They should be understood as tools supporting Turkey's internal colonialism and external power politics. And, for this ethnic-nationalist state that tolerates no significant expression of cultural difference, the destruction of Kurdish land, culture and settlement is not an unfortunate by-product of dam construction, but part of the point. The massive, recently-completed, Ilisu Dam has disrupted the ecology of the whole Tigris valley, drowned the 12,000-year-old town of Hasankeyf and its surrounding archaeology, and immediately displaced around 80,000 people. It has also given Turkey even more power over all the places downstream that depend on the Tigris water.

Turkey controls 90% of water flowing into the Euphrates and 44% into the Tigris – and has historically been unashamedly selfish in its water use. By 2019 they had cut flow rates since 1975 by 80% into Iraq and 40% into Syria. But their recent actions go beyond selfishness. They have turned the rivers into weapons of war. A 1987 agreement between Turkey, Syria and Iraq was supposed to guarantee a minimum flow in the Euphrates of 500 cubic metres a second. Since January 27th Turkey has cut this to 200 cubic metres, and the situation in the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria has become increasingly desperate. 30 out of 200 pumping stations are out of action and others are working at half capacity, leaving half a million people without safe drinking water. Crop failure has become a huge problem (with poor rainfall making irrigation even more important), the prices of animal fodder have soared, and fish stocks are devastated. Increased ground water extraction is depleting reserves that could be totally extinguished in two years. 80% of the region's electricity came from hydroelectric turbines, but the dams have been reduced to operating a single turbine at a time. Total output will soon be down from 500 megawatts to less than 100, and there are fears of long-term

damage to the generators if pumps can no longer function to keep them dry. Severe electricity rationing affects industries, jobs and every aspect of life. Turkey may not currently officially be at war with North and East Syria, but this attack on the basic needs of a civilian population is a war crime.

As if this were not already enough, last week the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that Turkey-backed factions had begun “digging tunnels and erecting large soil barriers on Khabur River in areas under their control... seizing water supplies to SDF-held areas and the entire region of the Syrian Jazeera.”

Previously Turkey has used its control of the water flow to destroy crops in North and East Syria through flooding, and every summer villagers have to keep a constant look out to try and prevent the burning of their crops.

Last week also saw other important news concerning Turkey's role in the war in Syria. No news summary can ignore the videos from mafia boss Sedat Peker, spilling the beans on his former friends in high places. In his latest video, he talked about Turkey's support for Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian franchise of al-Qaeda. He described an arms delivery organised by SADAT – a private military company closely linked to Erdoğan – and commercial deals involving other men close to the Turkish president. Although, as Fehim Tastekin points out in al-Monitor, much more has already been exposed about Turkish involvement and “the debate triggered by Peker's revelations is a debate over just a snippet of an extensive traffic”, it highlights issues that have not been properly discussed, especially within Turkey itself.

As I was writing this, news came in of a fire in the Shariya camp for displaced Yezidis in South Kurdistan. Over 400 tents have been destroyed and several people are injured. Poor electrical wiring and other equipment, along with crowded conditions, make such camps a fire-risk; yet, as the Free Yezidi Foundation has noted, they are not provided with fire extinguishers. Yezidi Emergency Support emphasises that “These are not just tents, these are the entire belongings of hundreds of traumatised people, all that is left from a genocide, photos, documents, their only clothes”. The families in this and

other similar camps escaped from Şengal (Sinjar) when it was taken by ISIS in 2014. Most would like to return, but the agreement brokered by the US and UN to hand control of the area to the Iraqi government and the KDP, far from making things safer has added a new layer of uncertainty. As in so many parts of the globe, US interference with Şengal has made the situation worse and more dangerous.

US support for their NATO ally has led them to follow Turkey's lead in condemning the PKK as terrorists, hampering the chances of effective international action to restrict Turkish aggression against the people and ecology of the South Kurdistan mountains. And, in North and East Syria, while US airstrikes played a vital role in the defeat of ISIS, peaceful progress in the liberated areas remains under threat. Despite the danger and destabilisation caused by ongoing ISIS insurgency, a week ago, Biden's 2022 defence budget reduced support for the forces fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, including the SDF. This will put pressure on the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria to make cuts to other vital spending. However, these cuts would be more than offset if the US were to use its influence to restrain Turkish aggression and to put a stop to Turkey's water wars. Yet again, the US appears to be more concerned about winning a war than ensuring subsequent peace.