

This is what colonialism looks like – a weekly news review

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High in the Kurdish mountains, in the modern state of Iraq, a battle is being fought that can impact the whole Middle East and the wider world beyond. Yet most people have never heard of it, and even those who have, avoid talking about it. On one side is a massive imperial army, intent on invasion and occupation and the imposition of fascistic rule. On the other, is an organisation of guerrillas who have been fighting that army for forty years in defence of their people's existence and culture, and who see their struggle as an existential fight against colonialism and fascism.

But how can we talk about this battle when, in so many countries, those guerrillas are listed as terrorists and any attempt to report on their struggle is looked at with suspicion? Turkey has the second largest army in NATO and an increasingly lethal fleet of attack drones, however, in their battle against the Kurds, their most lethal weapon has been a word. By labelling the PKK as terrorists, and persuading their NATO allies to do likewise, they not only portray their own actions as part of the “war against terror” and delegitimise any sympathy with the PKK, but they also make it very difficult for outsiders to discuss and analyse what is happening. However, we cannot understand the Kurdish struggle without talking about the PKK, and we cannot understand Turkish imperialism if we ignore a vital piece of the jigsaw.

It is now two weeks since Turkey launched its latest attacks in its long-running campaign in South Kurdistan/North Iraq, and Kurdish political analysts are clear that this is about much more than its stated objective of disabling the PKK guerrillas. According to the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), “It is the strategic aim of Turkey’s Neo-Ottoman policy to crush all political, cultural and social gains of the Kurds and to push the whole region into chaos.” This chaos, they argue, would then provide opportunity and legitimacy for Turkey’s further expansion even beyond the Kurdish areas.

International commentators may be more comfortable talking about the Autonomous Authority of North and East Syria or the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq than about the PKK, but Turkey’s attack on the PKK puts these regions at threat too. And other parts of Iraq and Syria are also at risk. Turkey has even produced maps where its borders have been expanded to incorporate Mosul, Kirkuk and Aleppo.

On 30 April, Turkey’s Interior Minister announced that they intend to establish a new military base in the parts now under attack in order to control the surrounding area. And he compared this with what they have done in Syria. He didn’t go into more detail, but their occupation of Syria is clearly intended as permanent. Turkey already has around 40 bases in Iraq and over 5,000 troops.

According to Fehim Işık, writing in Yeni Özgür Politika, “Firstly, they plan to carve the geography of Kurdistan to pieces, so they can easily gain military

control; secondly, they plan to destroy these smaller pieces one by one and complete the occupation.” And then they would move on to Mosul and Kirkuk.

Protests from the Iraqi government have been little more than symbolic; however, Turkey could expect to encounter active resistance from Iranian backed militias if they move outwith the Kurdistan Region, and this would bring its own consequences.

Ehmad Pelda, in *Yeni Yaşam*, explains how Turkey carries out its invasions and occupations: “First, it uses its military to settle in a specific region. Then it builds roads, communication facilities, military zones and police stations. In addition, by mobilising the villagers in the region, they are trying to create social support by using them as agents and village guards...” He explains how they have courted the politicians and businessmen in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, creating a comprador class whose personal fortunes and futures are inextricably tied to Turkey. These are people who not only welcome Turkish soft power in the form of an increasing Turkification of culture, but readily encourage Turkish military intervention against their PKK rivals, helping the invading army with infrastructure and information. Instead of recognising and resisting Turkey’s spreading occupation, they join with them against their Kurdish brothers and sisters. Masrour Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), who is Prime Minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government, parrot’s Turkey’s propaganda. He told Al-Jazeera, “The Turkish state has no problem with the Kurdish people. The PKK is not supposed to be here...” If he really believes that Turkey has no problem with Kurds, how does he explain the PKK’s creation?

In an indication of the extent to which the KDP kowtows to Ankara, last week representatives from the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) were refused entry to Hewlêr (Erbil) by the KDP’s internal security forces and had to return to Silemani, which is under the control of the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The pro-Kurdish HDP is the third largest party in the Turkish parliament and is under major attack by the Turkish government.

It is difficult to work out what is actually happening with the invasion in the mountains. Reports vary wildly depending on who is doing the reporting, but it

is clear from the Turkish Defence Minister's much-ridiculed complaints about the PKK's weaponry that, as in Gare a few weeks ago, they are encountering a strong and determined resistance. This should be no surprise. History is replete with examples of guerrilla forces getting the better of conventional armies – although new drone technology makes this harder, and the PKK have reported that Turkish forces are also using gas, in contravention of international law. But the Kurds are at home in the mountains and have the unwavering determination that comes with fighting in a war to which they have committed their lives and on which Kurdish existence depends.

Turkey's military campaign in Iraq is the continuation of a long history of colonial war that was practised within Turkey's borders for many decades before being exported into neighbouring regions. İsmail Beşikçi described Kurdistan as an international colony ruled over by four different occupying powers: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. In each part, Kurdish identity was brutally suppressed.

On 4 May, Kurds remembered the Dersim massacre, which began on that day in 1937, and continued through most of the following year. By the time it stopped, tens of thousands of Alevi Kurds were dead, and others had been forced to migrate. Three years earlier, a law had been passed in the Turkish Parliament stipulating the forced migration of the country's Kurds from their homelands; and this had been followed by the imposition of military control over Dersim. In 1937, the people of Dersim rebelled, and in crushing the rebellion, the Turkish state stopped at nothing, even shooting and burning women and children in their homes. Still today, the Turkish government will not identify where the leader of the rebellion, Seyid Riza, was buried after he was hung; and nor will they open the archives to allow people to find out what happened or to trace the "lost girls" who were taken and adopted by Turkish army officers.

Dersim has become a symbol of state brutality and of resistance, but the oppression is more than past history. In its battle against the PKK, the state continues its policies of collective punishment. The 1990s saw widespread forced migration of Kurdish villagers, and when the Turkish army laid siege to Kurdish cities in 2015-16, hundreds of people were killed, and hundreds of

thousands were forced to leave their homes. Turkey has also developed a corrosive system of armed collaborators, or village guards, who are often forced to work for the government by threats of expulsion or worse. In a moving article about the Dersim Massacre, published in Jacobin, Jaclynn Ashly quoted Gulizar, one of the survivors: "In the 1930s and '40s, they massacred us. In the '70s and '80s they tortured us. In the '90s they destroyed our villages. Now they continue to imprison us. Nothing has changed."

Last week, the Turkish military announced the start of an operation that was being carried out over four provinces and involved over 2,000 soldiers; and military operations continue in Lice, which has been under attack for weeks. Ground and air forces (including combat drones) are being aided by village guards who destroy the forests to try and flush out any guerrillas.

The scale of the fighting in South East Turkey/North Kurdistan has allowed lawyers to argue successfully in the Belgian courts that the PKK should not be described as a terrorist organisation. International law awards the state the monopoly of violence, but, in recognition of anti-colonial struggles, it does make an exception when resistance reaches the scale of a civil war. Then, those resisting are no longer regarded as criminals but as a party in a non-international armed conflict, subject to the laws of war. However, terrorist listings tend to be guided by political considerations rather than legal ones.

The Kurdish areas of Turkey are heavily "securitised" and full of military bases, but oppression is also carried out through the police and the deeply-politicised judiciary. The big HDP show-trial is currently on hold during lockdown, but will start up again once lockdown is lifted. Last week, 255 people were detained for attempting to demonstrate on May Day in Istanbul's Taksim Square, in defiance of a ban; and lawyers challenged new regulations that would criminalise people who film the police.

On World Press Freedom Day – 3 May – the Journalists Union reported that, last year, 274 journalists were put on trial in Turkey, and 43 are currently in prison. A prisoner from Sincan Women's prison in Ankara told of the continued mistreatment of political prisoners. Covid hygiene measures have been abandoned and the staff take no precautions. Books they are sent are

not delivered, and, apart from basic food, they are expected to buy everything they need, but are now being forbidden to buy things on behalf of fellow prisoners who have no money. Other political prisoners reported on the callous mistreatment of those with health problems, who are being kept in handcuffs all day or refused essential treatment. After a former PKK fighter died (in suspicious circumstances) in Hewlêr, his family were told that they could only have his body if they handed over his eight-month-pregnant wife, who had also been in the PKK. These negotiations were carried out by the KDP on behalf of the Turkish secret services, and the expectant mother is now in Turkish custody in Mardin.

Also, as in every other week, Abdullah Öcalan's lawyers have applied to visit their client, in the full knowledge that their application will be refused; and political prisoners have continued their rotating hunger strike to demand an end to Öcalan's isolation and also better prison conditions for everyone. This hunger strike is now on day 163.

In Syria, the Turkish occupation has involved both widespread ethnic cleansing and Turkification, as well violent mafia-rule by the various jihadi gangs that Turkey has used as mercenaries. Turkey continues to make life hard for the people of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria through low level military attacks and by deliberately holding back water from the Euphrates. Water levels are now drastically low. There is lack of water for agriculture, and hydroelectric dams are working at a fraction of their normal capacity, resulting in power rationing. This in turn affects industry and has also put impossible pressure on gas consumption. In cutting the water flow to North and East Syria, Turkey is not only breaking its 1987 agreement with the Syrian government (which has finally a protest and call for international action) but is also breaking international law by depriving the civilian population of an essential resource.

All these different areas of violence and heartache are consequences of the same imperial campaign for a greater, and increasingly mono-ethnic, Turkey. For Turkey, the biggest obstacle to their neo-Ottoman dream is the Kurds. Conversely, for all those who are concerned at the rise of this increasingly

fascist power, it is the Kurds who offer hope of puncturing its expansion and helping to usher in a fairer more peaceful alternative.