

THE NATIONAL – 8 FEBRUARY 2025

COMMENT

Permanent Peoples' Tribunal on Turkey is much-needed first step

10th February

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The tribunal hears evidence from Rojava (Image: Sarah Glynn)

IT was a preliminary statement, but it couldn't have been clearer.

The judges of the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal examining the responsibility of Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and key political and military leaders for alleged crimes of aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity in Rojava concluded: "The testimony we have heard paints a consistent, compelling picture of

widespread, pervasive and systematic punishment of a people. Their crimes? Being Kurdish, and creating a society built on principles of equality, justice and solidarity. The aim of the punishment is the eradication of the Kurdish identity, presence and culture.”

Last Wednesday and Thursday, 300 people gathered in a university auditorium in Brussels to listen to harrowing testimony of the actions carried out by Turkey and their mercenary militias against the Kurds of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, or Rojava.

The Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal is a grassroots forum for highlighting the abuse of human rights through careful testimony and legal argument.

Its rulings have no official status but, because they are backed up by evidence and expertise, they have a weight that makes them difficult to ignore. The lack of enforcement mechanisms is a problem shared with official international bodies such as the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice.



At a time when official structures are increasingly being trampled underfoot, the grassroots version may well prove more robust.

The panel of judges brought together a wide range of legal experience from different countries, and all the evidence was presented by lawyers who showed how it contravened international law – both international conventions and customary law.

Although the “defendants” did not feel the need to respond to the invitation to appear and make their defence, we are all familiar with Turkey’s “justification” for its

actions. The judges' preliminary statement makes clear that Turkey's claim "that its operations are 'self-defence' against 'terrorists and their supporters' in Rojava" is "patently unfounded". The Autonomous Administration is not now and has never been a threat to Turkey.

The crime of aggression is considered the supreme international crime, but no-one has actually been prosecuted for aggression since the immediate post-Second World War period. Crimes against humanity and widespread attacks on the civilian population are systematic, and often overlap with war crimes, which are grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions and of customary humanitarian law.

The examples presented over the two days demonstrated the comprehensive nature of Turkey's attack on the people of the region, and how this targets both Kurds as an ethnic group and the society that they have built, which is based on multiethnic coexistence and women's rights.

We were shown pictures of destroyed power stations and medical facilities, of barren hills that had recently been forested and a 3000-year-old temple bombed to pieces and used as a military training ground.

We heard about the mass displacement of Kurds and other minorities from the regions occupied by Turkey – forced to flee not just from the immediate danger of war but from the systematic violence that faced those who remained – and the thousands of people left without water or electricity after the deliberate targeting of vital infrastructure.

They heard from schoolgirls who had seen their friends' bodies strewn across the volleyball court after a bomb hit their UN-sponsored school; and from a courageous survivor of two years of imprisonment, torture and rape, who was told by her captors that she was only there because she was a Kurd, as well as from the families of murdered women, targeted for their role in politics or civil society.

We should have heard directly from some witnesses in person, but they were not given visas and had to speak over the internet.

It was explained how these attacks aim to undermine the Administration and turn people into refugees; and how the targeting of women is an attempt to force women out of public life – the attack on women's rights is an attack on a fundamental pillar of Kurdish society.

The lead prosecutors explained they had avoided the charge of genocide because the resulting discussion would have drowned out their vital presentation of the facts, but

that all the building blocks for genocide were already in place, and one step further in the current direction could make it indisputable.

This tribunal was conceived long before Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) took control in Damascus, but current events make it all the more relevant.

Turkey enabled the incubation of HTS; leaders of Turkey's militias, with appalling records of abuse, have been awarded prominent positions in the new Syrian army, and the Autonomous Administration claims that Turkey is trying to undermine the possibility of a peaceful agreement between themselves and the new "interim government".

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