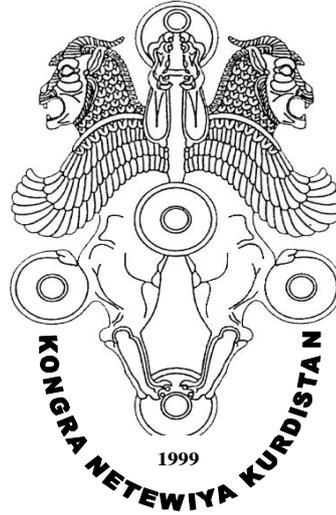


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- Briefly Information File -

War Intensified Against the Kurds Diverts Attention from the Turkish State's Crisis

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Index

- *Deep Economic Crisis*
- *AKP-MHP Repression and Counterproductive Pandemic Response*
- *Using the Coronavirus as a Biological Weapon Against Kurds and the Opposition*
- *The Symbiotic Relationship Between AKP and MHP*
- *Conflict Producing Foreign Policy*
- *Neo-Ottoman Military Misadventures with No End in Sight*
- *Kurds Face COVID-19 and Turkish Military Attacks*
- *Weaponising water in Rojava/North and East Syria During the Global Pandemic*
- *Erdoğan Fights for His Own Political Survival by Launching a War in Kurdistan*
- *The Strategic Importance of Zini Werte*
- *Kurdistan is Not an Instrument for Turkish Regional Power or Global Hegemony*
- *Our Appeal to the UN, European Union, European Council, and OSCE*

War Intensified Against the Kurds Diverts Attention from the Turkish State's Crisis

Authoritarian Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP-MHP government are now facing a situation of sustained crisis. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, this crisis has become even more obvious and acute. The government is unable to fight the pandemic and cannot provide adequate medical care or economic aid, and the autocratic one-man leadership strategy of Erdogan has proven ineffectual and counterproductive.

Erdogan's economic, political and social failures cost him and his party, the AKP, last year's mayoral elections in Turkey's largest cities, Istanbul and Ankara, both previously held by the AKP for well over a decade, suggesting that he could lose a forthcoming general election. The election results were a shock for Erdogan, who understood that he had lost all support from Kurdish voters. His response was to take revenge. The Kurdish issue, deeply entwined with many major conflicts of the Middle Eastern including those in Syria and Iraq, is again a primary focus of Erdogan, who has chosen to intensifying hostility against the Kurdish people to try to ensure the his own survival and that of the weakened Turkish state.

Deep Economic Crisis

The outbreak of the coronavirus hit Turkey's economy badly, heavily impacting tourism and international trade. Foreign investment has declined, and Turkey's currency continued to weaken. Inflation is rampant and uncontrollable. According the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), unemployment in Turkey increased by almost 1 million in 2019, with Turkey maintaining a total unemployment rate of 13-14% over the last year and reporting unemployment of about 4.5 million persons prior to the spread of the coronavirus to Turkey and surrounding areas, a number expected to sharply increase due to the coronavirus pandemic. Turkish militarism consumes the state's treasury, and the strategy of permanent militarism, particularly against the Kurds, has led the country into poverty and brought about destabilization in all aspects of life.

AKP-MHP Repression and Counterproductive Pandemic Response

Many high-profile opposition activists have been sentenced to prison terms. The Turkish state has become the world's biggest prisoner of journalists. At present, about 90% of media is pro-government, and the prohibition of the freedom of expression, thought and the press deepens the anger of society.

The AKP-MHP government's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have primarily focused on consolidating power and continuing to stifle opposition. President Erdogan's government and Interior Ministry have punished the country by blocking councils and municipalities run by opposition parties from organising aid campaigns to help the poor during the coronavirus pandemic.

Using the Coronavirus as a Biological Weapon Against Kurds and the Opposition

The Turkish state also continues to make efforts to kill Kurdish and opposition prisoners by spreading COVID-19. On 13 April, the Turkish Parliament passed a law that is expected to enable the early release of up to 90,000 criminals, including rapists, mafia bosses, child abusers, and other criminals due to the coronavirus pandemic. Kurdish leaders, lawyers, journalists, human rights defenders and opposition politicians and activists who oppose the AKP-MHP government have been pointedly excluded from this release order.

With COVID-19 is spreading at an alarming rate across Turkey, the lives of thousands of political prisoners remain at serious risk. The Turkish state has ignored the 25 March call by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet for governments to reduce the number of people held in detention and to release every person detained without sufficient legal

basis, including political prisoners and others detained for expressing critical or dissenting views. On 29 April, Turkish Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul stated that 120 prisoners in four prisons were infected with COVID-19, but the actual number of those infected is unclear. Additionally, the authorities have used the pandemic as an excuse to block communication with prisoners.

The Symbiotic Relationship Between AKP and MHP

Erdogan's AKP is facing unprecedented challenges. As last year's local elections demonstrated, the Kurds are now political kingmakers in Turkey, and this challenges the AKP's hold on power. The nepotism and corruption of the Erdogan family has damaged Erdogan's image and led to distrust both within his own party and, more generally, among the public, and two new parties have recently been founded by former founding members of the AKP, both of whom previously had prominent posts in government.

Thus, Erdogan and the AKP are increasingly dependent on the ultra-nationalist and racist MHP, a party linked to the Grey Wolves paramilitary group that has killed thousands of Kurds and others perceived to be opposed to the aims of the Turkish state over the last few decades. Even as the AKP splinters, Erdogan's alliance with the MHP remains strong. As for other political parties, Erdogan continues to use mass detention to prevent any opposition groups from organising.

Conflict Producing Foreign Policy

Erdogan's strategy of neo-Ottomanism was developed to escape the state crisis through acts of military aggression and occupation in the Middle East, with the Turkish military now engaged in wars of choice in countries including Syria, Iraq, and Libya. As a result, the Turkish military is now embroiled in major conflicts with throughout the region and is at odds with global and regional powers.

The Turkish state believes that, by adopting a policy of moving between the two influential global players in the region, Russia and US, it can gain backing for its policies of occupation. Despite being a NATO member, the Turkish state purchased S-400 surface-to-air defence systems from Russia, in direct violation of NATO policy. Using tactics like this to gain regional leverage, Erdogan has made Turkey into a regional and global pawn. The Turkish state is now distrusted by the US, Russia, and major powers in the Arab world. While the Turkish state and military now cooperate with Russia in Syria, particularly in Idlib, they remain at Russia's mercy, and, in Libya, Turkish and Russian forces oppose one another in a bloody proxy war.

Erdogan's use of refugees to exert political and diplomatic pressure against the EU has harmed Turkey's ties with Europe. Faced with a serious crisis, Erdogan is not afraid to exploit helpless people, and his cynical use of the large, vulnerable Syrian refugee population in Turkey, like his military aggression against the Kurds, is a clear demonstration of this fact.

Neo-Ottoman Military Misadventures with No End in Sight

Erdogan's neo-Ottoman expansion strategy is currently in a very deep crisis. The Turkish military has been unable to achieve any military success in in North and East Syria, Idlib or Libya. Internal conflicts between Turkish military-backed jihadist mercenary fighters in the Turkish-occupied territories of northern Syria often give way to bloody clashes, and recently, on 28 April, led to a bloodbath in Afrin when a bomb killed at least 46 people and injured over fifty more, including civilians.

In the Idlib province of Syria, tensions are rising between Turkish military-backed jihadist forces and other groups such as Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a powerful offshoot of al-Qaida who have a strong presence in the Turkish-occupied area. Turkey's Idlib occupation, which involves thousands of Turkish soldiers, has also become a dead end with no resolution in sight, generating serious financial costs.

Kurds Face COVID-19 and Turkish Military Attacks

During the global battle against the deadly coronavirus pandemic, the Kurds must also protect themselves against Turkish military attacks. Despite the appeal of UN Secretary-General António Guterres for a global ceasefire made on 23 March, the Turkish state clearly views the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to intensify its policies of war. On 3 April, Secretary-General Guterres reiterated his call for an immediate global ceasefire to facilitate the delivery of lifesaving aid and bring hope to places those in zones of conflict.

The Kurds of the autonomous region of North and East Syria have, in contrast, agreed to heed the UN call. On 28 April, the Turkish military targeted the Kobane Canton. The attacks continued in the region of Shehba, where intense bombing has targeted over 200,000 displaced people from Afrin currently reside, resulting in severe damage. Nonetheless, Russia and the US, both member states of the UN Security Council with direct agreements with the Turkish state and military regarding their presence and actions in northern and eastern Syria, have remained silent on Turkish military aggression.

On 15 April, Turkish armed drones (UAVs) attacked the Maxmur Refugee Camp in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq), killing three young women. The Maxmur Camp, founded in 1998 by Kurds forced to leave their villages in northern Kurdistan (eastern Turkey) in the 1990s due to repression by the Turkish state and brutal Turkish military aggression, is home to about 13,000 people. The camp is officially under the protection and control of the UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. Neither the UN nor the Iraqi government have fulfilled their legal responsibilities to protect the people of this camp, which the Turkish state sees this as a license to continue to attack these civilians.

The Turkish state tries to influence public opinion to legitimize its occupation of parts of Syria. Shortly before the attack in Turkish-occupied Afrin on 28 April, Turkish combat drones attacked a of the security checkpoint in Kobane. That same day, Turkish warplanes also attacked the Xakurke region in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq), killing two young men, from the town of Shino in eastern Kurdistan (Iran).

Weaponising water in Rojava/North and East Syria During the Global Pandemic

The Turkish military and Turkish-military backed jihadist forces took control of the Allouk water station during their invasion of North and East Syria in October 2019. The Allouk water station, near the town of Serekaniye (Ras al-Ayn), provides water an estimated 460,000 persons in the al-Hasakah governorate, including three displaced persons camps. The Turkish state has interrupted water pumping several times since the start of the year.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) has called on Turkish authorities to immediately do everything possible to resume supplying water through the Allouk water pumping station, stating that the Turkish authorities' failure to ensure adequate water supplies to Kurdish-held areas in North and East Syria is compromising humanitarian agencies' ability to aid and protect vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 crisis. Michael Page, deputy director in the Middle East and North Africa division at Human Rights Watch, stated, "In the midst of a global pandemic that is overloading sophisticated governance and infrastructure systems, Turkish authorities have been cutting off the water supply to regions most under strain in Syria."

Ensuring that people can enjoy clean, available, acceptable, accessible and affordable water and sanitation is a human right. The Turkish states blocking of water flow from the Allouk water station, a hostile and inhumane act which leaving hundreds of thousands without access to clean drinking water, constitutes a war crime and will severely worsen the impact of the coronavirus in the affected region.

Erdoğan Fights for His Own Political Survival by Launching a War in Kurdistan

Following the silence of the UN, US, EU, and the Council of Europe (EC) regarding Turkish military aggression in Maxmur, Shengal (Sinjar), Kobane, Afrin, and Shehba over the last few years, the Turkish state began waging a broader military campaign to attack and occupy the Qendil (Kandil) region of southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq). Despite the airspace of this region being under the control of the Iraqi government and the US, both have kept silent on the repeated Turkish incursions. The political and governmental crisis inside Iraq is being exploited by Erdogan, and the US policy of ensuring Turkey remains a NATO member in Middle East has given Erdogan cover to pursue his aims.

The Turkish state is now preparing to launch a major military offensive by putting pressure on Kurdish political forces in the region of Zini Werte close to the Qendil mountains in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq), implementing the classic colonial tactic of “divide and rule”. By using Kurdish forces as proxies, the Turkish state believes it can incite Kurds against Kurds, and weaken and destabilise Kurdish political institutions, and occupy more Kurdish land. At present, an estimated 25 Turkish military bases are located in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Since its foundation, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, as a constitutionally and internationally recognised Kurdish governmental entity, has been a thorn in the side of the Turkish state. Erdogan sees any destabilisation of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and any weakening of the KRG as a victory. However, many Kurdish political parties and civil society groups have stated that no intra-Kurdish conflict will be allowed to occur, as the ambitions of the Turkish state are well understood by all.

The Strategic Importance of Zini Werte

The Zini Werte region is 40-50 kilometres from the Iranian border and about 35 kilometres from the city of Ranya. The region represents the western front of the Qendil mountains and is an area of strategic military importance. From Zini Werte, the Zergele region in Qendil can be easily controlled and, from Zini Werte through the Choman region in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq), the historic Kurdish city of Mahabad in Iran can be reached.

This region has been known as a PKK guerrilla zone for decades. While the Turkish state uses the presence of the PKK in the region as a pretext for military aggression, the truth is that the Turkish state seeks to destabilise and control this region to crush the aspirations of the Kurdish people in all parts of Kurdistan. Furthermore, the potential occupation of Qendil, the ultimate objective of an assault on Zini Werte, is not just a problem for the PKK or Kurds – it has far more extensive and dangerous ramifications for the region.

It is clear that the Turkish state is doing everything possible to ensure its own survival, regardless of the potential cost in human lives. The most important question here is why the US and the NATO remain silent when their ally violates international law and provokes more conflict in the region and begs the question of whether or not the US and NATO have given the Turkish state a green light to proceed with such aggression, despite the dire consequences.

Kurdistan is Not an Instrument for Turkish Regional Power or Global Hegemony

While many circles claim that the Zini Werte issue is an internal Kurdish political conflict, the truth is far different. Rather, it is one of many conflicts that could cause further instability in southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq) and create a power vacuum that the Turkish state and its jihadist allies or the resurgent so-called Islamic State (ISIS) will seek to fill.

Tensions between the US and Iran reached a new high with the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the powerful commander of Iran’s Quds Force, on 3 January. In response to this strike, Iran attacked US military bases in Iraq, and the US subsequently withdrew from certain positions in the country, moving some military personnel into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq from other areas of the country.

As the Turkish military moves to broaden its occupation of southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq) and ISIS exploits chaos in Iraq's disputed areas near the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to regroup, there is also a serious possibility that US forces based in the region and Iranian military or Iranian-backed militia forces could clash in the region. The current standoff in Zini Warte is one of many conflicts that could easily intensify, provoking bloodshed in the relatively stable region of southern Kurdistan and beyond if the US and NATO grant the Turkish military a free hand.

Defending against Turkish military aggression in Zini Warte and preventing an invasion of Qendil and a broadened Turkish military occupation of Kurdish land is not just an internal Kurdish affair. Any seemingly localised aggression like these actions near Qendil will give way to a larger regional and global crisis, and the Turkish state's ambition to attack and occupy areas outside of Turkey's borders is certainly not restricted to this area.

From this perspective it is necessary to understand Turkish military provocations in Zini Warte will exacerbate the ongoing crises in the region. The Kurds have announced their preparedness for achieving a democratic solution. Solving the Kurdish problem through democracy in Turkey would have a positive impact on the entire region. The Kurdish issue, with all its national, regional and global aspects, can play a vital role in promoting peace, and taking urgent action against the current Turkish aggression in Zini Warte and around Qendil will make a contribution towards a wider peace.

Our Appeal to the UN, European Union, European Council, and OSCE

1. We call for the implementation of the recent UN calls for a global (multilateral) ceasefire. To bring about tangible results on the ground, Turkish government must respond positively to unilateral ceasefires observed by opposition forces and turn these into bilateral ceasefires or, at a minimum, reciprocal unilateral ceasefires.
2. We call for an end to military escalation and the opening of new military fronts, and for the de-militarisation and de securitisation of humanitarian affairs during this time of a global health crisis and intense humanitarian need.
3. We call for the implementation of the recent UN call for the release of all political prisoners.
4. We call for worldwide support for the democratic opposition in Turkey against the authoritarian regime of President Erdogan
5. We call for diplomatic, political, economic, and legal sanctions against the Turkish government for violating international law and human rights conventions, pursuing policies of military aggression aimed at destabilising the Middle East, and cutting off of natural resources such as water from vulnerable civilian populations