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Kurdistan National Congress

***-Background Information-
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The New Turkish Threat, the Same Old War

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The New Turkish Threat, the Same Old War

Since 1978, the Turkish state has been engaged in an armed conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Over the past four decades, the Turkish military has burned down more than 4,000 Kurdish villages. Historically, the goal of such war crimes has been to “defeat the PKK.” But in actuality, Turkey’s genocidal policies are as old as the Republic itself (founded in 1923). For the last century, Turkey has tried to discredit Kurdish freedom struggles, both within Turkey and to the outside world, slandering resistance leaders as uncivilized bandits, criminals, and separatists. The Turkish state has used such defamations as pretexts to commit many atrocities, such as the Zilan Massacre (1930) and Dersim Genocide (1938), and to hang Kurdish leaders such as Sheikh Said (1925) and Seyid Riza (1937).

The Kurdish people’s leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was abducted in 1999 and has been held in a state of illegal and inhumane isolation on a Turkish prison island for the past 25 years. Moreover, since March 25, 2021, Mr. Öcalan has been intentionally “disappeared,” as Turkey has barred him from speaking with his lawyers or family, while providing no public information on his health or safety. It pursues this policy of incommunicado detention and solitary confinement—defined as torture under international law—to cause psychological trauma to the Kurdish people and to collectively punish them for following his political philosophy of liberation.

Indeed, whenever the Turkish state faced economic, social, domestic, and foreign policy crises, it utilized warfare against the Kurds to distract the Turkish people from its own failures. To justify its attacks, the Turkish state has weaponized a new epithet against the Kurds: “terrorists.” Today it uses this term much as it once wielded the terms “bandits” and “separatists” but with much more potent affect. Turkey has invested huge amounts of its wealth in propping up the notion that the Kurdish activists who protested its torture chambers, as well as the murder of Kurdish journalists in broad daylight by JITEM death squads, were all “terrorists” with no human rights to due legal process.

The Kurdish struggle for self-determination resulted inevitably from such depravities and continues to this day, but regrettably, a nationalist backlash and Kurdish phobia has also emerged within Turkey. The PKK, like its predecessor movements, is not the cause but the consequence of Turkish colonialism and the brutalities it inflicts in order to sustain its own power. But unlike other mass uprisings of the last century, the PKK enjoys the sympathy and support of Kurds in all four parts of occupied Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. This is because the PKK has given the Kurds a sense of national self-confidence and motivates them to unapologetically fight for their destiny against all obstacles.

Turkey Plans a Renewed War on Kurd

Since October 2023, Turkey has been carrying out a relentless barrage against the Kurds of Syria and Rojava, in an attempt to eradicate all infrastructure and means of productive life in the region. On February 29, 2024, the internationally renowned organization Human Rights Watch published a report showing that [Turkey is responsible for apparent war crimes in occupied Syria](#).

Now Erdogan’s regime is planning a renewed war against the Kurds. A military offensive in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is set to begin immediately after the local elections on March 31, 2024. Turkey will launch a major military attack on the PKK guerrillas in the mountains of Southern Kurdistan (northern Iraq). Already some 161 villages in the region have already been forcibly evacuated and a further 602 are facing imminent displacement, journalist Botan Germiyani [reported](#).

After a cabinet meeting on March 4, Erdogan declared: “Hopefully, this summer, we will have permanently resolved the issue regarding our Iraqi borders. Our will to create a security corridor 30-40 kilometres deep along our Syrian borders remains intact. We have preparations that will give new nightmares to those who think that they will bring Turkey to its knees with a ‘terroristan’ along its southern borders.”

Turkey’s governing coalition of AKP-MHP Islamists and ultranationalists needs external support for this new war, geopolitical cover for this unprovoked planned aggression. So diplomatic traffic between Ankara and Washington, Ankara and Baghdad, and Ankara and Erbil has recently intensified. Meanwhile, the

Turkish intelligence agency MIT, the foreign ministry, and the army have been preparing for the covert illegalities and assassinations that typically accompany such operations.

On March 6-8 the Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan visited Washington to help plan the new war against the Kurds. Relatedly, the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK) issued a [“Response to allegations made by US Secretary of State Blinken Concerning the PKK”](#) and asked for clarification: Was the United States giving the green light for future Turkish military aggression?

Turkey Preys on an Unstable Iraq

Relations between the Turkish state and the Arab Middle East are burdened by the legacy of the former Ottoman Empire. Due to the lack of a democratic culture and the absence of policies of reconciliation, antagonism remains. Especially since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iraq has remained politically weak. Corruption, as well as the power struggle between Iran and the United States, have left Iraq unable to assert its own identity. It now serves as a geopolitical pawn. Turkey exploits that instability by violating Iraq’s sovereignty, under the pretext of countering the PKK, and carrying out a piecemeal occupation. Quite simply, Erdoğan’s regime does not consider Iraq to be a sovereign state.

Turkey has militarily and economically enriched itself through the oil trade with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Ankara’s collaboration with the ruling Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)—which takes place without Baghdad’s permission—has enriched both the Erdoğan and the Barzani families, at the expense of the region’s stability and peace.

Turkey also manages an array of mercenaries and proxy groups, such as the Turkmen population around Kirkuk, which it utilizes against Baghdad and the KRG. Turkey also maintains control over the dormant cells of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, militants whom they funneled along their “Jihadist Highway” starting in 2014.

And now Turkey is trying to force the Iraqi government to actively participate in its renewed war on the Kurds, as revealed in a barrage of diplomatic traffic between Ankara and Baghdad. The Kurdish issue has thus risen on the agenda of Iraqi politics as well, as *The New Arab* has announced with the headline: [“Turkey is considering a military incursion into Iraqi Kurdistan, aiming to penetrate 40 kilometers into the region to pursue PKK militants.”](#)

On March 14 the Foreign Relations Committee of KCK (Kurdistan Democratic Communities Union) warned of a Turkish war against Southern Kurdistan and Iraq and called on all organizations to refuse to be a party to the Turkish state’s calls for genocide, proclaiming: [“The Turkish state under the fascist chief Erdoğan is the biggest security threat for Iraq.”](#)

What does Turkey have in store for northern Iraq? One need only look across the border at northern Syria, where since October 2023, Turkey has destroyed around 80 percent of the infrastructure with airstrikes and drones on the pretext of fighting the PKK, while killing and injuring hundreds of civilians in the process. The aim of this aggression against the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) is to depopulate the region and carry out a methodical ethnic cleansing, as Turkey has already done in the Turkish-occupied province of Afrin. The AANES, however, has stated that far from being cowed into leaving the country, its people have stepped up and taken measures to meet their daily needs.

Turkey’s Economy in Tatters

Why does Turkey behave so aggressively toward its neighbors?

The first clue is to follow the money—in this case the rapidly declining strength of its currency and economy. In February 2024, according to *EuroNews Business*, inflation in Turkey surged to a fifteen-month high, surpassing even grim expectations and fueling fears of further interest rate hikes. Also in February, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute, the country’s annual inflation rate rose to 67.07 percent, again overshooting forecasts: analysts polled by Reuters had predicted that Turkey’s annual inflation would climb to 65.7 percent for February.

Soaring inflation has caused consumer prices to rise over 67% year on year. According to the [Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) (OECD), Turkey has the fourth-highest unemployment rate among its 38 member countries. Among the 33.3 million unemployed individuals in the OECD, almost 10 percent were from Turkey. These permanent price increases have exacerbated poverty, which leads to social dissatisfaction.

This is another reason for a war against the Kurds: to divert attention from the everyday problems of the Turkish people, which are in fact the result of failed state governance. But instead of “let them eat cake,” referring to the suffering people of Turkey, the message from Ankara’s thousand-room Presidential Palace is essentially “let them eat videos of dead Kurds on the news.”

Turkey’s Geostrategic Significance in Peril

Turkey’s geographical location along the Silk Road long has long given the country its geostrategic weight, allowing it to act as a bridge connecting East and West. That geostrategic importance has been a cornerstone of Turkish foreign policy, allowing it to exert pressure on global superpowers.

In the face of China’s Belt and Road Initiative, however, the global trend is to find new trade routes between East and West. In 2023, at the G20 meeting in New Delhi, the Indian prime minister proposed the creation of an India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), to counterbalance China’s initiative. IMEC would facilitate the transportation of goods from India to European markets by creating a new corridor that would pass through Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Israel, Cyprus, and Greece. At the meeting, a memorandum of understanding was signed.

Turkey was excluded from the memorandum, which stood to deprive it of its traditional geostrategic importance. IMEC would weaken Turkey’s levers of manipulation in its foreign policy. Erdogan clearly stated his dissatisfaction: “Countries are striving to expand their commercial routes and broaden their regional influence. We say there can be no corridor without Turkey. The most suitable route for traffic from east to west must pass through Turkey.”

To maintain some leverage, Turkey is planning its own Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project, a proposed \$17 billion venture to connect 1,200 kilometers of high-speed rail and road networks from the Grand Port at Al-Faw in Iraq near the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey and then on to Europe. The project is to be completed in 2025. But unlike the trade routes envisioned by IMEC, this project lacks international support. Neither Turkey nor Iraq is able to cover the estimated cost of \$17 billion, so Turkey needs financial partners. It is therefore currently in intensive negotiations with Qatar and the UAE.

This project is another reason Turkey needs to launch a large military attack in Iraqi Kurdistan against PKK positions. To create a new energy route, the path must be conflict free, as a precondition of foreign investors.

Turkey’s Violations of Press Freedom and Human Rights

Turkey currently ranks as the second-worst country in the world when it comes to freedom of the press. For this reason, the British Article 19 and Human Rights Watch [called on Turkish authorities](#) to allow fairness during the campaigns for the forthcoming local elections on March 31. The human rights commissioner for the Council of Europe also referred to Turkey as a [“hostile environment”](#) for journalists and human rights defenders.

And in this second-worst of countries, Kurds remain the number-one target, and not only when it comes to press freedom. It may be hard for outsiders to fathom, but in the twenty-first century, an entire people are banned from using their own mother tongue. Even when [Kurdish MPs speak in their native language in the Turkish parliament](#), microphones are switched off in front of cameras. In the protocols, their remarks are entered as having been made an “unrecognized language”—the word *Kurdish* does not appear even there.

Turkey's Foreign Policy of "Neither-Nor"

Turkey is a member of many international organizations such as NATO, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and more. In multipolar world politics, it bases its foreign policy strategy on a strategy of "neither-nor," on being neither inside the alliances nor completely outside them. By this strategy, **Turkey believes, it gains space for tactical maneuvering. But this space is limited. When Sweden applied for NATO membership, Turkey did not initially uphold NATO interests, as would be expected of a member, and even put other members under political pressure. Such moves cause increasing problems in its foreign policy.**

Much as it has profited from the war in Ukraine, Turkey also expected to profit from the conflict between Hamas and Israel. This time, however, the doors were not open to Turkey's disingenuous offers to serve as a mediator. And although Erdogan had anointed himself the spokesman for the Palestinians, he did not find favor in the Arab world. Additionally, his tactic of labeling Hamas "freedom fighters" in order to increase pressure on Western states, did not work as he had hoped. Instead, it further highlighted his hypocrisy with regard to the PKK.

Kurdistan Is Not a No-Man's-Land

It its proposed Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project, the trade route that Turkey plans to create would pass through Kurdistan. It is yet another case of Ankara's colonial habit of failing to consult or include Kurds in decision-making processes that affect them, as if Kurdistan were some kind of "no-man's-land." But Kurdistan is not a "no-man's-land." Turkey behaves as if it were the natural owner of all of Kurdistan, including in Syria and Iraq: Erdogan clearly sees Iraqi Kurdistan as the former Ottoman Empire province of Mosul, and Rojava as the former Ottoman province of Aleppo.

In November and December 2023, in a quest to resist such colonial occupation, PKK guerrillas pushed back against Turkey and its mercenaries, inflicting heavy losses on the Turkish military. Since international law has failed to restrain illegal Turkish aggression, the Kurds themselves are left with no choice but to use armed resistance to protect their homeland. International law forbids Turkey to invade a foreign territory and build military bases there without permission, but it systematically does so anyway in Iraq. Therefore, the question of why the PKK continues to resist is a rhetorical one—it is fully within its legal rights.

Regardless of whatever short-term objective Erdogan has in mind for his aggression, his true intention is clearly to fulfill the dream of the 1920 Misak-ı Milli (National Pact), or the dream of restoring former Ottoman lands. The first step entails occupying Iraq and Syria. But the Turkish occupation plan will not succeed, as northern Iraq and Syria are historically Kurdish majority areas. Furthermore, in the case of Iraq, the Zagros Mountains are protected and patrolled by the PKK, for which Baghdad should be grateful.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Thanks to the ideas of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, the Kurds have today achieved a standard of freedom that can be seen not only regionally but also internationally. The PKK has provided a democratic alternative for the world, which is currently plagued by nationalism, sexism, religious fanaticism, and environmental devastation. That is one reason why it is impossible today to defeat the PKK on a social, political, and military level.

As the owner of the second strongest army in NATO, Turkey has historically received a great amount of material support for its annual assaults on the Kurds. Ankara long ago manipulated states to list the PKK as a "terrorist organization," even though the PKK never attacked or threatened them. Yet the PKK's slogan of "Jin Jiyan Azadi" (Women, Life, Freedom) has become a clarion call for women all over the world. The PKK's victories over ISIS in Iraq, where they helped save the Yazidi people from further genocide, has also engendered global sympathy for and solidarity with Kurdish guerrillas. At a time when the Turkish state was helping ISIS kidnap, rape, and enslave thousands of Yazidi women and girls, the women guerrillas of the PKK were defending those same young Yazidi girls on Mount Sinjar. Rarely in today's world do the

forces of good and evil display themselves with such moral clarity. The contrast is made even more stark by Turkey's state sponsorship of terror groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda—and by the fact that it jointly runs Idlib with them.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), one of the oldest and most renowned U.S. think tanks, has studied the significance of the Kurdish freedom movement under the leadership of the PKK in the context of global and regional upheavals. In its 2024 Security Report, the CSIS states explicitly that [the PKK does not pose a threat to Western countries](#).

It is obvious that PKK is fighting the Turkish army only because the latter is trying to occupy Rojava and Southern Kurdistan. History shows us that nobody with the ability to defend themselves will accept having their land occupied. The West seems to applaud this sacred principle when it comes to Ukraine but demonizes it when it comes to Kurds. But an anticolonial struggle is the most natural right of self-determination enshrined in many United Nations documents. Likewise, Turkey also does not respect the international laws safeguarding state sovereignty, calling further into question which of the two sides in the Turkey-PKK conflict should actually be ostracized as illegitimate.

Turkey's failure to resolve the Kurdish question, it is clear, will drive the country to bankruptcy. Ankara can either democratize its Republic or have it collapse. For their part, nations of the world should refuse to be accomplices to Turkey's refusal of reality, its belief that it can "kill its way" out of Kurds' demands for their inalienable human rights. If the West does not stop coddling Erdogan and Fidan, his de facto war minister who pretends to be a diplomatic statesman, then Iraq and Syria will suffer further Turkish invasions, war crimes, and instability. Surely the Kurds and others in the region deserve better, after all the traumas they have suffered.

A better alternative is to pressure Turkey to negotiate with the PKK to finally resolve the Kurdish question. Unravelling this Gordian Knot could transform the forty-year-old Turkish-Kurdish armed conflict into a potential peace process. The Kurdish People's Leader Abdullah Öcalan proved this in 2013-15, when he took part in negotiations with the Turkish state after announcing a unilateral ceasefire. But achieving this solution will require Western states to speak out against Turkey's war plans, which could engulf the entire region. The Hamas-Israel conflict already has the region on the precipice, and a Turkish occupation or attempted annexation of northern Iraq and northern Syria could push all states on the ground—the United States, Russia, Iran, Syria, Iraq, and their Arab neighbors—to the brink of a third world war.

Even though Erdogan considers international law to be illegitimate, the rest of us should not. Occupying the territory of a sovereign state cannot be justified, even if an armed group that is resisting your genocidal policies resides there. Therefore, the United States, the European Union, the United Nations, and Council of Europe must take immediate measures to prevent further bloodshed. Let the sound of dialogue replace that of exploding bombs.

Commission on Foreign Relations of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK)

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