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Don't Let Erdogan Start Another Regional War

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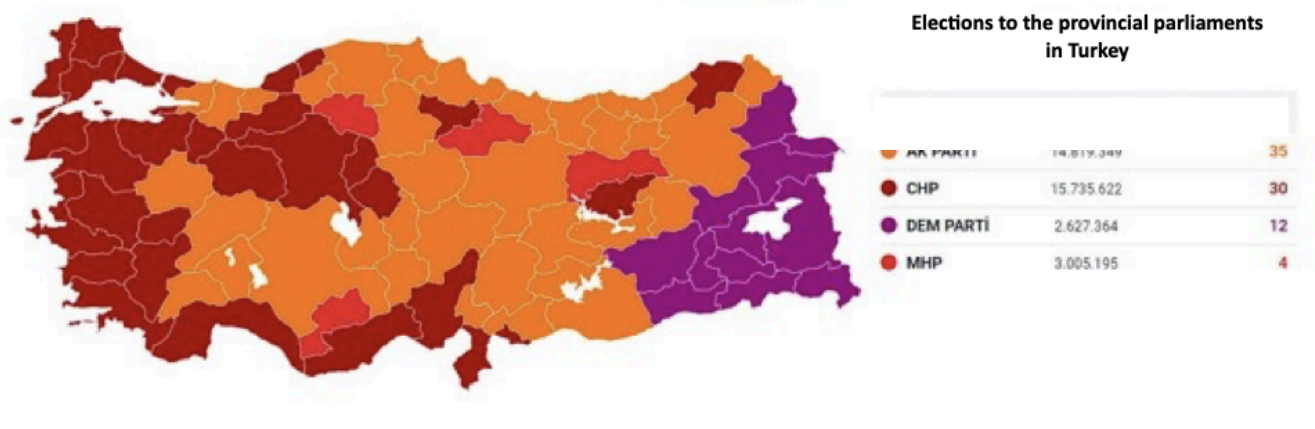
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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's plans to expand military operations in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) threaten to spark another regional war.¹ Around the world, demands for peace, democracy and stability in Palestine, Israel and the entire Middle East are growing in response to Israel's devastating war in Gaza and resulting regional escalation. The same response is needed to address Turkey's war, ethnic cleansing and violation of international law in Iraq, Syria and Kurdistan. If the international community fails to resolve these crises, the Middle East will face unprecedented war and conflict with irreversible global consequences.

Erdogan needs the war to stay in power

In Turkey's March 31st local elections, Erdogan suffered the most significant defeat of his 22 years in power. Almost 60% of Turkey is now governed either by the main opposition CHP (Republican People's Party) or the pro-peace DEM Party (Peoples' Equality and Democracy Party). This happened despite unfree, unfair election conditions.²

Just days before the vote, at Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations, millions of Kurds called for a political solution to the Kurdish question.³ They argued that this can be made possible by the release of Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan, who has been imprisoned since 1999 under inhumane conditions and who has not been allowed to communicate with the outside world for over 3 years in violation of international law.⁴



Elections to the provincial parliaments in Turkey

Erdogan's government remains uninterested in a political solution. As they have after past electoral setbacks in 2015 and 2019, they are choosing to escalate military operations against the Kurds in order to galvanise nationalist support and find pretexts to suppress all dissent.

¹ <http://www.kongrakurdistan.eu/en/the-new-turkish-threat-the-same-old-war/>

² <https://www.turkishminute.com/2024/03/31/allegations-of-voter-fraud-in-predominantly-kurdish-se-mar-turkeys-local-elections/>

³ <https://medyanews.net/newroz-celebrations-in-diyarbakir-call-for-peace-amid-renewed-tensions/>

⁴ <https://ocalanvigil.net/capture-and-imprisonment/>

Erdogan orders occupation of Iraqi Kurdistan

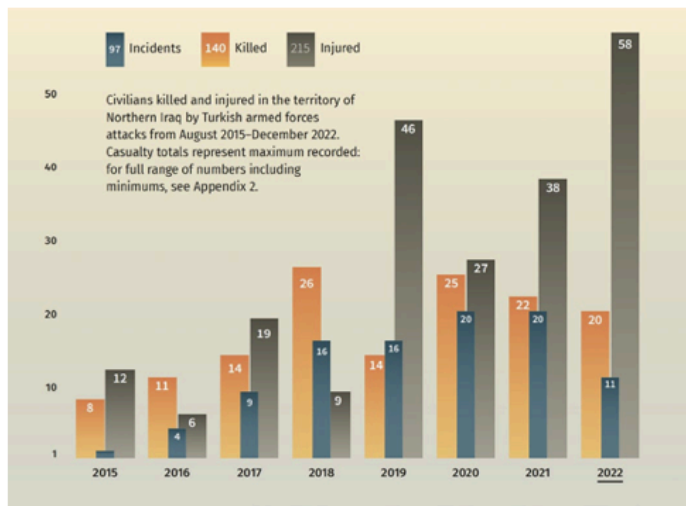
Erdoğan had already opened the planned expansion of Turkish military operations in northern Iraq in a meeting with his cabinet on 4 March. "With God's blessing," said Erdoğan, "we will also finally resolve the issue of our borders with Iraq this summer." The aim of the military efforts is to establish a "security corridor" along the border that extends 30 to 40 kilometres into Iraq. Numerous other representatives of the Turkish state, such as Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, also promised intensified military campaigns.

Turkey has occupied territory in the KRI for several years. At least 87 Turkish military bases and extensive military road networks have been established at depths of 5 to 80 kilometres into Iraqi territory.⁵ Turkey has launched countless airstrikes in the KRI, expanded its drone activity, and allegedly used prohibited chemical weapons. According to the organisations Airwars⁶ and CPT⁷, around 170 civilians have fallen victim to the attacks since 2015.

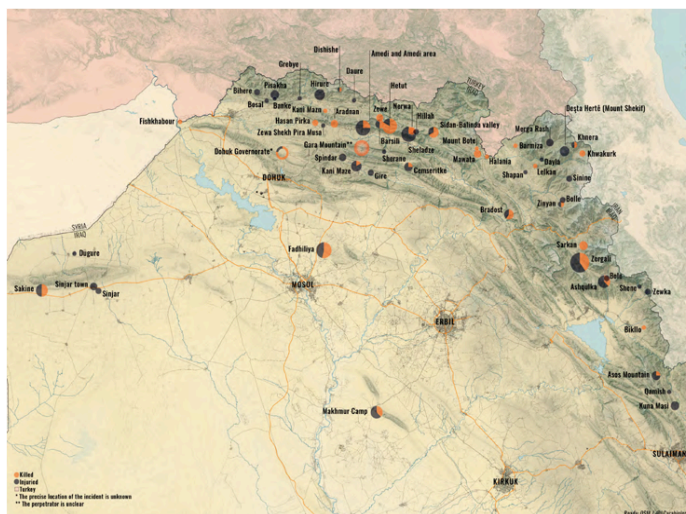
Turkey claims that it needs to control this region in order to counter alleged 'security threats' from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In reality, Erdogan's government has different aims.

In the short term, the goal of these widespread attacks is to put pressure on the villagers and civilians in the mountains and drive them out so that Turkey can establish and control a larger area for its operations.

At least 800 villages have been forcibly evacuated since 2015 with the help of Barzani's KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party). The long-term goal of the attacks is to destroy the autonomous status of the Kurdistan Region and to secure Turkish control of strategic territory in northern Iraq, including important regions around Mosul and Kirkuk.



Graphic of Turkish military attacks and their casualties, until 2022



Map of Turkish military attacks and their casualties, until 2022

⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-push-into-iraq-risks-deeper-conflict-2023-01-31/>

⁶ <https://airwars.org/civilian-casualties/?country=iraq&belligerent=turkish-military>

⁷ <https://cptik.org/reports-1>

KDP collaboration jeopardises Kurdish national unity

Erdogan paid a brief visit to Hewlêr (Erbil), the capital of the Kurdistan Region, on April 22. There, he secured the support of the KDP. Since then, local sources have increasingly reported provocative advances by KDP militias such as Roj-Peshmerga and Zerevanî units into areas controlled by the HPG and YJA-STAR. These forces have reportedly attempted to secure areas that Turkey seeks to occupy.

Erdogan is aiming for an intra-Kurdish conflict between the KDP, the PKK, and the PUK, capitalising on the weakness of the KDP. Erdogan's recent visit to Hewlêr (Erbil) shows how much the Turkish president is counting on the active participation of the KDP in his efforts to occupy Kurdish territory in Iraq and crush Kurdish aspirations in Turkey.

Power needs a strong economy

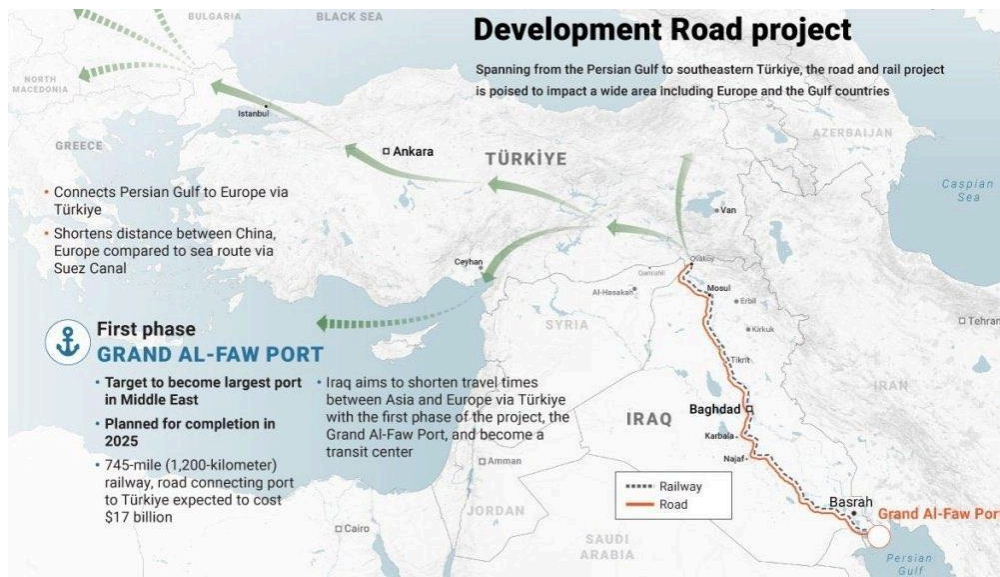
Erdogan's rule has devastated the Turkish economy. Constant war in Kurdistan, including the establishment of hundreds of military bases, the financing of extremist proxy militias, and the procurement of weapons and other resources, has drained the state's resources and often brought about international economic consequences.

As a result, the Turkish lira has been in a severe currency crisis since 2020. Inflation is rising steadily. Since March 2024, Turkey has been the country with the fourth-highest annual consumer inflation in the world at 68.5 percent. According to Trading Economics, this rate exceeds the inflation rates of all African countries.⁸

As part of the intensive diplomatic relations between Ankara and Baghdad⁹ negotiations have been held in recent months on the "Iraq Development Road" project, which envisages the construction of a 1,200 km railway and road link from the Iraqi port of al Faw in Basra through Kurdish areas to the Turkish border in order to facilitate an urgently needed economic upturn. The 17 billion dollar development route is intended to serve as a new link between Asia and Europe and is thus a counterpart to the U.S.-led project IMEC (Indian Middle East Economic Corridor), which was agreed upon last year at the G20 summit in Delhi in July.

⁸ <https://bianet.org/haber/turkey-ranks-fourth-in-global-inflation-rates-294494>

⁹ <https://medyanews.net/diplomacy-with-menaces-as-erdogan-goes-to-bagdad-a-weekly-news-review/>



However, the Turkish state appears to be making the success of the project dependent on the destruction of the PKK and the creation of a security zone, thereby extending its expansion efforts into the regions of Duhok, Mosul and Erbil. Notably, the development road is relatively far from the areas where the PKK is active. The planned route runs westwards from Mosul, bypassing the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and reaching as far as the Turkish border town of Ovakoy, an area where the Turkish army already has a strong presence on the Iraqi side.

Nevertheless, Turkey claims that it has to secure the Gara Mountains for the route to be considered safe, even though the mountains are at least 30 kilometres to the west of the development road's passage.

For Turkey the implementation of the "Sinjar agreement" is also "closely linked to the realisation of the project". On 9 October 2020, the Iraqi central government and the Kurdish regional government led by the Barzanî family signed the "Sinjar Agreement" under the supervision of the United Nations, which provides for the disarmament and dissolution of the Sinjar Resistance Units, a Yazidi self-defence unit formed after the IS attack. This would mean leaving the Yazidi community, which experienced an internationally recognised genocide in 2014, unprotected and without any right to self-determination.

Under the guise of the Turkish-Iraqi development road, Erdogan wants to achieve his real goal of completing Turkey's occupation of northern Iraq and severing the Kurdistan Region from North and East Syria. This raises the question of whether the Iraqi government will tolerate such Turkish actions in the name of better relations and whether the economic impact of a larger war in Kurdistan will make the alleged benefits of the route worthless.

The Middle East as the Epicentre of Global Conflict

Kurdish society and international voices of solidarity have campaigned for an end to Turkey's war policy and the associated destruction of the livelihoods of millions of people in Kurdistan for years. In recent years, this war has led to an increased emigration from Kurdistan to other countries.

Given the multipolar reality of politics in the 21st century, any local or regional conflict today has global repercussions. Every state and non-state actor tries to use any given regional conflict to advance its own interests. Many regional and global powers have the ability to impact events — not only one or two powers or blocs alone. Erdogan's planned war could therefore turn into a war with regional and global repercussions. Kurds in Syria, Iran, Turkey and abroad will not remain silent. Arab countries, as well as Iran, may not accept Turkish aggression in their region and may choose to respond.

Violation of international law, ethnic cleansing and demographic change

At the same time, Erdogan attempts to crack down on the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria, whose military forces have defeated ISIS along with international forces, and which enjoys a high reputation for its multi-religious tolerance, freedom for women and democratic political system.



Erdogan holds up the Rojava (West Kurdistan/Syria) map at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in New York City, 2019

But the Turkish occupation of Northern Syria led to massive displacement of Kurdish population and were fraught with serious abuses of both human rights and humanitarian law, including indiscriminate shelling, summary killings, unlawful arrests, torture and enforced disappearances, and systematic pillaging and unlawful seizure of property, says HRW¹⁰. This leads to the assumption that an extended occupation of northern Iraq will also lead to further ethnic cleansing against Kurds and other indigenous peoples and consequently to demographic change of the multi-cultural region.

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/02/29/everything-power-weapon/abuses-and-impunity-turkish-occupied-northern-syria>

Turkish question - Kurdish solution

It is obvious that Erdogan has no interest in democratising Turkey. His foreign policy strategy is also geared towards profiting from conflicts. While he bailed out Russia with bank accounts, his son-in-law, Selçuk Bayraktar, supplied drones to Ukraine. He also played a double game in the Hamas-Israel war.

Erdogan is trying to use Turkey's membership in NATO, which has always supported Turkey in its fight against the Kurds over the last 40 years, to his own personal advantage through a policy of blackmail. Deals with Sweden and now with Netherlands, whose former prime minister is running for the office of NATO Secretary-General, show that Erdogan links his approval of NATO decisions to the condition of supporting his war against the Kurds. His disregard for the decisions of the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled on the release of a number of opposition politicians, also shows that he is increasingly trampling on international agreements. Turkey under Erdogan has thus become an international issue.

Erdogan would not be able to do all this if international bodies such as NATO, the EU and the Council of Europe had not remained silent about Turkey's policy of oppression against the Kurds. The Kurds have been continuously resisting the Erdogan regime for 22 years and have always sought a political solution.

From 2013 to 2015, these efforts brought some results. Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan engaged in dialogue with representatives of the Turkish state. A ceasefire between the PKK and Turkey was held for two years. During this time, Turkey refrained from conducting destabilising military operations in Iraq and Syria, improving its relationship with neighbouring states and with the international community as a whole. Öcalan had created an atmosphere in Turkey that gave people hope for peace. The 2013-2015 dialogue process was also welcomed internationally. It was Erdogan who sabotaged this process because he wanted to use this time to prepare for a new war.

Now that Erdogan has lost his political power in the local elections, he is more dangerous, as this analysis explains. However, he is also weaker. His vision for Turkey has been rejected by many citizens of Turkey and poses a threat to the interests of many Middle Eastern states and global powers. To prevent negative domestic and international consequences, Turkey must be placed on a different path.

It is time to listen to the solution of the Kurds, who have been saying for a year that Öcalan must be given a new chance to participate in negotiations to resolve the Kurdish issues within the framework of a new Turkish constitution.

- The first step, however, is to lift the three-year-long ban on communication with the outside world that has been imposed on him.
- World public opinion, the United Nations, and the Council of Europe, which are responsible for ensuring compliance with international law, as well as the United States and the European Union, must immediately exert pressure on Turkey to return to this democratic process, which would stabilise the region by resolving the Kurdish question.
- As the war in Gaza shows, frozen conflicts are inherently unstable, and attempts to resolve political problems by military means alone makes further loss of life and international instability inevitable. Sustainable political solutions to the Kurdish question and other regional crises based on human rights, democracy and international law are the only path out of the bloodshed.

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

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