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Human Rights, Independence and Self-determination

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History and background information

After the division of the Ottoman Empire by the states that won WWI, more than 35 million Kurds were forced to live scattered throughout Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria and the South Caucasus.

The Kurds are the largest stateless people. Throughout the last 100 years, the right for self-determination was systematically deprived from the Kurds. They were confronted with a bloody history of oppression, human rights violations and the prohibition to use and experience their own language and culture in each of these states.

Today we mainly focus on the situation in North Kurdistan (Turkey) and West Kurdistan, in other words Rojava (or North-Syria).

Turkey

It is unfortunate to mention this, but since the Turkish Republic is founded (in 1923), various peoples living in Turkey have been systematically discriminated and suppressed. We refer to the genocide on Armenians, Christian peoples and other non-Turkish peoples.

Concrete examples are the massacres of Ali Batê Isyani in 1919, Koçgiri in 1921, Zilan in 1930, Dersim in 1938 during which tens of thousands of civilians were killed and deported by the Turkish army.

Kurds were prohibited to pursue their social and cultural development. The use of the Kurdish language, clothing, folklore and even of Kurdish names was banned. The words "Kurds", "Kurdistan" or "Kurdish" were officially banned and punishable by the Turkish authorities. For tens of millions of Kurds, the educational language is mandatory Turkish. Even today, the use in schools of Kurmanji (the local Kurdish language) is still prohibited.

Against this continuous oppression and denial of the Kurdish identity, rebellion started to grow under the leadership of the PKK (the Workers' Party of Kurdistan). This started in 1984 and is still ongoing. During these years of conflict, innumerable Kurds were deported from their villages by Turkish security forces. Thousands of villages were set on fire or destroyed.

Forced migrations are prohibited under international law. This however does not stop the Turkish state. They continue to do so, and it seems that the international community is watching with indifference.

Every attempt to stand up for the basic rights of the Kurdish people by democratic means has ended with the arrest of elected politicians and a ban on Kurdish political parties.

You name them: HEP, DEP, DTP, HADEP, KDP, PSK, etc. are a range of political parties that were forced to stop their political activities. These were initiatives of the Turkish authorities with approval of the Parliament.



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In 2014, the Democratic Party of Peoples (HDP) – another pro-Kurdish political party - tried to achieve change through the elections. They even managed to increase their votes significantly and to break through electorally. This seemed to be the signal for president Erdogan to pull out the plug from the peace process with the PKK. He wanted to rebuild on his popularity and started a new war with the PKK, hoping to push the HDP back under the 10% electoral threshold during newly proclaimed elections.

In 2015, the peace process was literally blown to pieces. There was the bombing in Suruç. So what happened? Several Kurdish cities (situated in the southeast of Turkey) proclaimed their regional authorities. Erdogan sent tanks to the Kurdish cities that were literally erased from the surface (Sur, Cizre, Nusaybin and Silopi). Several human rights organizations reported at that time that Turkish armed forces committed the most barbaric crimes against a civilian population. Citizens who tried to get out of their houses were shot by snipers. Hundreds of civilians were killed during these military operations, including the elderly, women, children and even babies. In many cases, injured people died because ambulances were denied access. Within the Kurdish Institute, we remember images from the old woman who was shot by the Turkish soldiers. She lied there during seven days in the street in sight of the rest of the family members.

People slowly bled to death in the street or died in the most horrible ways in the buildings where they were forced to hide from the bombing and shooting. Systematic refusal of medical assistance to injured people is recognized as a war crime.

After the "attempted coup" of **July 15, 2016**, President Erdogan definitively seized all power. What we saw was that the repression increased once more. Co-presidents of the political party HDP, but also their members of parliament disappeared behind bars. Democratically elected Kurdish mayors were dismissed of their duties and replaced by henchmen assigned by the Turkish government. This is a real mockery of the democratic process.

Anyone who dares to criticize the Turkish regime takes a huge risk. Academics, teachers, human rights activists, union members, and even lawyers are being prosecuted. Journalists writing critical articles risk to be imprisoned. Either it is an insult of the Turkish president, or they are accused of being a state enemy. Freedom of opinion and press no longer exists in Turkey.

In the meantime, Turkish channels and the Turkish press is distributing state propaganda. They stir up the hatred and violence against non-Turks: namely the Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians, Alevis, Yezidis, Jews, etc. The result is obvious: headquarters and local departments of the HDP are being attacked by violent crowd. Don't mention the fact that you are a member of the HDP and don't speak Kurdish in the street. The risk of being aggressed, attacked, or lynched is real.

Today, nothing has changed in Turkey. The latest local elections showed us that Erdogan lost popularity and many votes due to a bad economic situation. Turkey started an invasion in northern Syria and an occupation of the Kurdish regions. In Turkey, this means that Kurds in general are once more demonized as terrorists and the repression in the streets of Kurdish villages starts all over again.



Syria

Early 2018, the Turkish army, supported by jihadist military troops, attacked the predominantly Kurdish enclave Afrin in northwestern Syria. Until then Afrin had been a relatively safe place, governed by a mix of Kurdish-Arab autonomous administration and defended by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

This was – and still is – an illegal occupation of Syrian territory by Turkey. Numerous innocent civilians were killed during the Turkish attacks. The demography of the region was then intentionally changed. The homes of Kurdish citizens were looted and afterwards assigned to jihadists and their families from other parts of Syria. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights speaks of 300,000 Kurdish civilians displaced by the Turkish aggression.

Those who nevertheless returned to their homes are systematically disadvantaged today by the new rulers. They are exposed to thefts, torture, abductions and arbitrary executions. Previously, women in Afrin were considered as equal in the society. Moreover, more than 40 percent of administrative positions were reserved for women. Now, they are forced into a burka under the terror of the jihadist militias supported by the Turkish state. Journalists were able to speak with Turkish soldiers after the invasion of Afrin. Their testimonies were clear: they spoke about "forced marriages" with militia members and daily rapes of women and girls. These practices remind us of the terror regime of Islamic State.

Today, civilians are still being abducted and released after paying ransom, they are randomly arrested and tortured. The natural resources of Afrin are used by the Turkish state and jihadists.

Two weeks ago, the Turkish state, together with jihadist militias, started an illegal invasion of the remaining Kurdish areas in northeastern Syria. This invasion is a gross violation of the sovereignty of Syria and a serious violation of international law. The cities of Serekani and Girespi became the first target. Aircraft bombed civilian targets, hospitals and aid workers in the refugee camps.

Turkey wants to place 3.5 million Syrian refugees in a 30 km-wide belt against the border. Similar to what happened in Afrin, Turkey wants to change the demography of the region and expel the local population from its historic habitats. In other words, it is planned ethnic cleaning of the Kurdish regions in Syria.

In the meantime, the Turkish army and the jihadist militias are once again committing war crimes against the population in the area: Kurds, Assyrians, Armenians, Suryoyo, etc.

A recent report from Amnesty International was devastating. The title of this report sounded like: "Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies"

Journalists from The Times and Newsweek obtained very worrying testimonies about civilians who were victims of white phosphorus bombing. The use of white phosphorus against civilians as a chemical weapon is prohibited by the Geneva Convention.

The jihadist militias don't take prisoners and they make no distinction between civilians and fighters. The Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf, Secretary General of the Syrian Party of the Future, was killed by the Turkey-supported Ahrar al-Sharqiya militia. She was dragged out of her car on a motorway and then executed.

Despite the so-called cease-fire, these militias continue to attack Kurdish villages. They even put on video and the atrocities they commit and distribute them via social media with the aim of frightening the population. The horror of IS repeats itself again today. Horror of which the Kurdish population was previously the victim, and for



which they sacrificed approximately 11,000 people. Turkish state terror and aggression continues. The international community is still watching. Concrete steps to stop these crimes remain far away.

Conclusion

The European Court of Human Rights and various international human rights organizations have frequently condemned Turkey for countless human rights violations.

When it comes to the abuse of human rights, the Kurdish people has seen it all. The collective rights of more than 35 million people are systematically violated until today. A great injustice in which the European Union bears also a historical responsibility and in which the European state members must take their responsibility today.

The Kurdish population calls for peace, democracy, self-determination – most essentially – their basic human, and people's rights.

Only peace, democracy and stability in the region can offer a solution to the refugee crisis and the terror threat that the European states are also facing.