

Erdogan's neo-Ottoman aspirations and the political-economy of the Afrin invasion

by Cihad Hammy - 19/01/2018 14:19



For the past few days, the Turkish state has made explicit its plans to attack and imminently invade the city of Afrin. This plan comes after ongoing shelling on Afrin for more than two years. Simply put, there are two key reasons as to why Turkey seeks to invade Afrin. Firstly, it seeks to dismantle the democratic project that has been advanced by the Kurdish freedom movement in Northern Syria since 2012. Turkey is terrified that this radical democratic project will spill onto its own side of the border, and further embolden the already existing projects of *radical democracy* in Bakur (Northern Kurdistan).

Moreover, the Turkish state is also attempting to viciously expand its influence over Syria through the imaginary of the Ottoman Empire which has largely stimulated the foreign policy of the Turkish ruling party (AKP). The story of Afrin, in this sense, also falls within the domain of Ankara's Ottoman dreams.

But in order to truly grasp the intentions of invading Afrin, one must explore the

ideological structures of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), especially now as they are currently undergoing drastic changes. After the referendum victory and the crushing of all political opposition since 2016, Erdoğan now seeks to extend his authoritarian hand beyond Turkish borders, impeding the development of democratic projects throughout the entire region of West Asia. Erdogan hopes that none will get in his way of reviving forgotten visions of the Ottoman Empire.

The new Ottoman rule: Turkish nationalism and political Islam

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's constitutional referendum was conducted during a state of emergency imposed right after a failed coup against his rule in July 2016. Consequently, this led to the brutal repression of political opposition, the forced closure of dozens of newspapers and TV channels, and the arrest of hundreds of journalists—all in violation of both national and international human rights law.

Modern Turkey, with its rigid secularism, created the very contradictions which led to the rise of an Islamist political figure like Erdogan. Yet, paradoxically, although Erdogan tries to surpass the legacy of modern Turkey, he also strives passionately to maintain its core institutions of the nation-state and Turkish nationalism. Erdogan, in this sense, is also a modern Turkish Statesman.

However Erdogan's rhetoric --fueled with the Ottoman imaginary-- might seem different, it is undoubtedly the case that the functions of the Turkish state still remain the same in regard to freedom and democracy.

One cannot overlook that this Ottoman ideal is also steeped in the ideology of political Islam. Over his 20 year reign, Erdogan has moved steadily to create a theocracy that exercises a monopoly over political power in the name of religion.

Functioning within the structures of modern Turkey and aspiring for the Ottoman Empire, the Erdogan party (AKP) is the [synthesis](#) of Turkish nationalism and political Islam. Both of these notions are inherently antithetical to progressive and democratic forces.

On the one hand, many massacres within history, from the genocide against Armenians to the massacres of Kurds in the present, can be directly attributed to Turkish Nationalism. The very architecture of the Turkish nation-state is predicated on the forced assimilation of its various cultures, ethnicities, and minorities under the rubric of creating "one nation, one language, one flag". Ethnic rights, by necessity, are suppressed while politicized ethnic minorities are treated as a threat to "national security".

On the other hand, under the AKP, political Islam is used for monopolizing Islam, to

manipulate the social sphere, and most importantly, to prevent the emergence of any progressive and democratic projects. As Samir Amin, an Egyptian-French Marxian economist, explains in his book Eurocentrism:

“Political Islam objects to the concept of emancipatory modernity and rejects the very principle of democracy, the right for society to construct its own future through the freedom that it gives itself to legislate.”

While some leftists, for example, [Judith Butler](#), choose to believe that Political Islam represents some primal opposition to global capitalist domination, nothing could be further from the truth. Political Islam openly accepts the neoliberal economy and "free market" for the capitalist forces, which is clearly evidenced by the Gulf states and more recently, by Turkey itself. Political Islam is a conservative project that thoroughly serves the capitalist world order.

The History of Turkey's invasions in Syria

On the 24th of August 2016, the Turkish Armed forces deployed ground troops into northern Syria to occupy Al Bab and Jarabulus. Their main goal was to preemptively prevent the connection of the Kurdish cantons of Kobane and Afrin.

The date of the invasion was not a coincidence.

It marked the anniversary of the battle of Marj Dabiq which took place in 1516–17 between the Ottoman Empire and the Mamluk Sultanate and ended in an Ottoman victory. Indeed, the battle of Marj Dabiq was a springboard for the eventual Ottoman conquest of much of West Asia. The symbolism of that battle 500 years ago was used heavily within Turkey before the operation and is a sign of the Turkish government's continuing expansionist mindset.

On April 24, 2017, the Turkish army [sent airstrikes into Northern Syria](#) targeting the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and ended up killing more than 20 people.

The date of this invasion was also not a coincidence.

The airstrikes on Northern Syria took place on the anniversary of the Armenian genocide which happened under the rule of the Ottoman empire. This should be seen for what it is: a clear warning to ethnic, religious, social minorities, and those who consider themselves within the political resistance of West Asia.

These two actions are manifestations of the underlying mentality that the AKP harbours. A mentality rooted in an affinity for the Ottoman Empire's expansionist drive.

The imminent invasion of Afrin has its own peculiar character within the AKP's

expansionist drive as well. It is also infused with anti-Kurdish racism. It has two important dimensions: a political and economic dimension. Both ought to be seriously investigated.

The Political Dimension

In order to extend his rule, Erdogan eliminated the development of a new democratic administration in Turkey which was embodied by the HDP, a pro-minorities party and alliance of the Turkish and Kurdish Left. The HDP, much like their comrades in Northern Syria- Rojava, see themselves as constructing the *Democratic Nation: A* struggle for radical democracy and peace within already established borders in West Asia. They are a heavily persecuted party, and many of their leaders are imprisoned.

The core of the Northern Syria Democratic Federal System project is the Democratic Nation developed by the ideological leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan. As a political vision, the Democratic Nation stands at odds with the Nation-state. Whereas the centralised nation-state seeks to create a homogenous nation through assimilating all cultures and languages via social engineering and, when necessary, pure violence, the Democratic Nation aims to engender fraternity, democracy, peace and freedom not just within the political governance of Kurdistan but also across the rest of the Middle East. Furthermore, political subjects under the Democratic Nation reclaim revolutionary politics and power to run their lives by engaging in local level institutions and assemblies created by all people. These assemblies confederate with each other on the local, regional, and national level. Thus, the *Democratic Nation's* main aim is to shrink and ultimately dismantle the centralized nation-state model as a model for the Middle East.

In the mire of unfree and fascist forces in Syria, feminism, radical democracy, revolutionary politics, and social ecology are all taught and practised on a daily basis in northern Syria. Cultures that were banned under the dictatorship of Assad have been revived again. Furthermore, all people work together to run their daily affairs and live together peacefully. Religious diversity is not simply 'tolerated,' it is celebrated. Women play their role as equals to men in all walks of life. The success of this project is the success of all oppressed people in Syria, not to mention that of the entire region of West Asia.

The Turkish state finds the Democratic Nation as a threat to its centralized nation-state. Thus, after kicking the peace table and deciding to wage war, it conducts massacres against the Kurdish people. And even after having imprisoned the Kurdish political leadership within Turkey, Erdogan still heads to northern Syria to invade Afrin. There is no doubt about it, Erdogan is terrified that the project of Northern Syria will inspire the Kurds who reside in Turkey. The Turkish State believes its anti-thesis

is Kurdish freedom.

Economic Dimension

The intention to invade Afrin is not only for political aims but is stimulated by cold and calculated economic interest as well. The very area in northern Syria in which the aforementioned Democratic *Nation* is being constructed stands in the way of a trade corridor between the Turkish state and the Arab World. If Turkey wants to trade with the Arab states, it must develop a route which passes through Syria. Therefore, the Turkish states' economy is at risk as far as Northern Syria is controlled by a Kurdish-led project.

It is for this reason that the Turkish state is trying its very best to dismantle the growing project in northern Syria, and why it's trying to entrust it to undemocratic and hardline Islamist groups who will acquiesce to the policies and agendas of the Turkish state. If the latter scenario fails (and it apparently has failed), the only window left for Turkey is to get closer to Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow, which helps us understand why Turkey has approached them recently. Moreover, the Turkish state, with its new allies, seeks to thwart the SDF from reaching the Mediterranean Sea. The recent shift of Ankara' to Russia's axis was a result of both political-- to fight the democratic project of north Syria-- and economic reasons.

If the attack comes to pass, the Turkish state will be faced with dauntless resistance. Which is what we must dissect next.

Resistance

One of most common phrases in the Kurdish freedom movement is "resistance is life". This sentence retains the deep and long revolutionary history of Kurds dating back to prehistory. In order to live a free life in this hierarchical, patriarchal, class, statist system, one must resist its domination and exploitation. While resistance aspires for freedom in life, hierarchal structures attempt to dominate, exploit, and monopolize every sphere (private, public and political) of life. Thus, the relationship between resistance and domination is dialectical. In other words, hierarchy's legacy of domination is countered by a long and deep legacy of freedom in a dialectical way. However, the outcome of this relationship must not remain just dialectical but rather a dialectical transcendence of hierarchy and domination.

In the Kobane battle, this dialectic emerged in its all forms. Fuelled by the philosophy of a long tradition of resistance, the Kurdish freedom movement could dialectically transcend the long legacy of hierarchy, patriarchy, and domination embodied in IS. It was a battle between radicalism and extremism. Indeed, it was the battle for freedom and life by resistance.

One of the legends of the Kobane battle was Arin Mirkin. Arin Mirkan was a young, revolutionary woman. Surrounded by IS jihadists, Arin Mikan carried out a suicide bomb operation to rescue her comrade and take control of the strategic position of Mishtenur Hill.

Arin Mirkan was born in Afrin and become the symbol of Kobani's victory.

Today, the Turkish state threatens to invade Afrin. Thus, it is crucial to make a comparison between Kobane of 2014 and the Afrin of today.

Geographically, Afrin is a densely mountainous area, unlike Kobane which has flat lands that make visible tens of Kilometers. In battles, geography is decisive and gives many Kurdish militants an edge on the battleground. Mountainous geography preserved the existence of Kurds for thousands of years. In the battle Kobani, less than 200 of Kurdish fighters were able to fend off IS attacks with Kalashnikovs alone. They did so for 40 days before the coalition started to strike IS positions. The number of IS jihadists were more than 7 thousand, and they were supplied with heavy weapons and tanks they seized after defeating the Iraqi and Syrian armies in big cities like Raqqa and Mousel. Moreover, some analysts [claim](#) that IS was supported by the Turkish state although this is difficult to substantiate.

The situation of Afrin, today, is completely different than that of Kobane in 2014. Afrin has organized itself for 6 years. The battle, if it happens, will not be limited in Afrin. It will be spread all over Rojava and Turkey. As the former PYD leader Saleh Moslem [warned](#):

"If such an attack has come to pass it will mean the war spreading into turkey and turkey starting to crumble. Attacking Efrîn will not be good for them at all."

The legacy of resistance will be continued in the city of Arin Mirkan (Afrin). And still, the vivid images of Kobane are fresh. Since Afrin gave birth to a legend like Arin Mikan, the fire of resistance will not be extinguished there. As the YPG Spokesperson Nuri Mehmud [put it](#):

"Afrin is a continuation of Kobane. The peoples of the world who fought with Kobane will do the same for Afrin."