

Who profits from the war in Afrin?

by Duygu Yildiz - 24/01/2018 19:16



On the 19th of January, Turkey launched a military campaign into Afrin, one of the four Kurdish-controlled cantons in northern Syria. Afrin has long been a safe haven for internally displaced persons in Syria. The Democratic Autonomous administration in Afrin has also constructed a system based on direct democracy and gender equality. And while Afrin was always at the risk of an invasion since Turkish shelling began two years ago, never has a Turkish attack on Afrin been so explicit. The attack is officially called 'Operation Olive Branch', an unfortunate irony since with airstrikes and artillery attacks, the fertile olive gardens of Afrin are being destroyed.

There are many ways to approach Turkey's attacks on Afrin, here I will focus on the economic dimensions of the attack.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan praised the distinctive nature of this military operation, particularly because it is being conducted with 'domestic and national' weapons. To reinforce this point, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim met with Turkish media owners in Istanbul a few days ago and presented a 15-point list as a guide to reporting, with one directive underlining the 'domestic and national' character

of the operation. So, why it is so important to characterise the military invasion of Afrin as such for Erdogan and his followers?

Turkey has been a leading international partner of Defence & Security Equipment International (DSEI), one of the world's biggest arms fair, since 2003. The role of Turkey in the world arm industry peaked when [Kurdish civilians were being massacred](#) during military operations in Kurdish populated eastern cities in 2015. In that very same year, while curfews were being administrated by the Turkish Armed Forces in the east, Turkey sent a large delegation to the DSEI fair. Turkey's weapons maker Roketsan – a component of the Turkish Armed Forces – signed a contract with Lockheed Martin, the largest arms company in the world, to develop a new F-35 fighter jet missile for the United States armed forces.

During those times, Turkey's armoury was non-domestic and non-national. President Erdogan insisted that this ought to be overcome, and made explicit his goal "to completely rid the defence industry of foreign dependency by 2023". This was also publicly announced in the media to motivate his supporters who could, in turn, help him gain more power against 'foreign enemies' as well as the so-called Kurdish 'threats' inside the country. But to be able to do that, Turkey would need to increase its capacity on arms exports, rather than arms imports.

Since then, Turkey and Turkish-owned arms company Nurol have gone into partnership with British-owned defence giant BAE Systems to develop a new generation of fighter jets.

During the negotiations, Turkey [vehemently insisted](#) on a maximum technology transfer, with full access to all source codes which would enable Ankara to make future modifications and upgrades on the aircraft. The Turkish government also demanded that only Turkish engineers and scientists be employed in aerodynamic design, body and engine production. Turkey even insisted on having access to all electronic, weapons and communications systems and if that wasn't enough, they demanded a monopoly over flight tests as well.

Despite the objections of the DSEI, Turkey achieved its requests, evidenced by the Turkish engineers and scientists who directly work on these weapons projects. Thus, the state-funded arms companies in Turkey have developed their own high technology war industry. Turkey is now on its way to producing its own planes, ships, tanks and now armed drones, usually in partnership with some of the world's leading military companies.

So far, this information provides a background on how Turkey is becoming a self-sufficient state in the war industry. But, the most important question is why Erdogan

and his followers are so determined on having a 'domestic and national' arms industry?

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To answer the question as to who profits from the war in Afrin, we must ask who is responsible for producing the 'domestic and national' arms that Erdogan seems to be so proud of. When we follow the money, we are led back to Selcuk Bayraktar, Erdogan's son-in-law and his family friends Latif Aral Alis and Ethem Sancak.

Bayraktar's company produces unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and armed drones. So excited he was to see his new toys in action, he even announced the use of these vehicles on his twitter account. 'For the first time' the tweet reads "national UAVs are on the mission at Operation Olive Branch.'

Sancak, a central executive member of the ruling AKP, is the owner of BMC, the company producing armoured vehicles which have been used, among other things, to disrupt protests in Turkey.

"Thanks to its advanced technology and vast experience in the defence industry, BMC meets the demands of the Turkish Armed Forces alongside other armies all around the world", BMC boasts.

Erdogan's close friend Latif Aral Alis, an owner of Sarsilmaz arms company, also gets a huge slice from the cake. He said that his firm's aim is to achieve the export target of 2 billion dollars by 2017 with hopes that this number will rise to 25 billion dollars by 2023.

Every missile fired by Turkish Armed Forces and every tear gas capsule fired by Turkish police provide cash for Erdogan's family and close supporters.

And in this regard, the so-called "Operation Olive Branch" is a huge opportunity for Erdogan's immediate political circle to profit heavily. The World's leading arms companies have earned millions of dollars from Turkey's military operations, with Turkey's so-called 'war on terror' being the biggest cash cow. But now, a Turkish elite composed of Erdogan's family and friends -- who consolidated power by staying close to him -- profit the most from the war against Afrin.

Whatever justifications are used to defend the Afrin invasion, be it 'border security' or an "operation against terrorist organisations', it's undoubtedly the case that someone will profit. In Turkey, they claim they want to destroy the presence of Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and in Syria, they say they want to defeat the Democratic Union Party(PYD), which Erdogan sees as an extension of the PKK. But as far as the arms industry is concerned, the goal is money.

Every war has a winner, and while militarily Erdogan has no chance to defeat Kurdish forces who gained experience in the battle against Islamic State, he will undoubtedly gain economic success. In fact, Erdogan and his immediate political circle have been winners – in strictly financial terms -- since they halted peace negotiations for a democratic solution to the Kurdish question and started military operations instead.

Nationalism has always been a powerful discourse within Turkish society, but nationalising arms is not enough to hide the reality: the arms being used in the ongoing war against Afrin are neither 'national' nor 'domestic', they are just making Erdogan richer and more powerful, while the economic woes of Turkey remain unaddressed and the people of Turkey suffer tremendously.