

Is Turkey preparing for an ethnic-cleansing of Syrian Kurds?

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On January 24 Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan raised some eyebrows about his intentions in northern Syria when, speaking about his ongoing military operation against that country's northwestern Kurdish Afrin enclave, he vowed to "wipe out the terrorists and then make the place livable" for the Syrian refugees in Turkey.

The Turkish president proceeded to blatantly distort Afrin's demographic make-up when he claimed that: "In Afrin, 55% are Arabs, 35% are Kurds and the rest are Turkmens."

While it's hard to precisely determine Afrin's demographics the Kurds have made up the majority of that region for generations. Since Afrin, along with the rest of Syrian Kurdistan, gained unprecedented autonomy from Damascus in 2012, as a de-facto result of the Syrian Civil War, they've sheltered displaced Arabs from across Syria. Until Turkey attacked it Afrin constituted a safe zone for many Syrians of different

backgrounds and was largely untouched by the war that devastated the majority of the country.

Al-Monitor's Fehim Tastekin [pointed out](#) that Kurds "are the overwhelming majority" in Afrin and share the region with "some Arabs, small groups of Turkmens in the northern rural area, Alawite Kurds in Mabata, Yazidi Kurds in Kastel Cindo and Ezaze and minor groups of Armenians and Circassians."

Erdogan's distortion of these demographics and his vow to return it to "its rightful owners" suggests that he intends to conduct some kind of ethnic cleansing there. Whether this is just rhetoric, intended for domestic consumption, or a real threat remains to be seen.

"It is hard to know exactly what Erdogan means when he says that Afrin will be returned to its original owners," Professor Joshua Landis, a Syria expert from the University of Oklahoma, told The Region. "I presume that Turkmen and Arab militias will have a free hand to do what they want in Afrin once they win, which will surely not be good for the Kurds."

Even though the so-called Operation Olive Branch is in its infancy, and will likely go on for many months, Turkey is already estimated to have [killed over 100 civilians](#) and [destroyed 60 percent](#) of the ancient Neo-Hittite temple of Ain Dara.

Turkey plans to conquer Afrin in two phases. The first phase, now under-way, is the establishment of a 20-30 kilometer buffer zone along the border. The second phase, planned, is an urban warfare campaign aimed at forcing the YPG from the area's population centers, which consist of a small city and approximately 350 surrounding villages.

"Referring to the second phase, the prime minister has said: 'We will destroy terrorists located in central Afrin and other regions.' This means engaging in urban warfare with the terrorist[s]. Is the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) experienced in this? Yes, it is. Silopi, Cizre. Remember those incidents?" [said](#) former Turkish Chief of Staff Gen. [Ä°lker BaÄŸbuÄŸ](#).

While [BaÄŸbuÄŸ](#) goes on to claim that Turkish commanders are wary of causing "collateral damage" the curfews and wholesale destruction of Kurdish towns and cities in Turkey's southeast, during Ankara's recent operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), he refers to is certainly not a reassuring precedent. The level of destruction of urban areas such as Sirnak became indistinguishable from the urban war-zones in neighbouring Syria.

More worrying is the kind of Islamist groups Ankara has shown little qualms about

collaborating with. Its deployment of forces into Idlib last October had little to do with combating the Islamist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) group, which controls that entire province. HTS even [escorted](#) Turkish troops to strategic positions south of Afrin, enabling Turkey to complete its encirclement of that enclave.

Turkey even worked directly with Jabhat al-Nusra, a previous incarnation of HTS and offshoot of al-Qaeda. On one occasion, [recounted by Professor Landis](#), Ankara even allowed Nusra militants "to mass inside Turkey in 2013 when they spearheaded an invasion from Turkish territory into Kassab, north of Latakia."

That region, Landis went on to note, "is known for its Armenian villages, the last traditional Armenian villages that were not ethnically cleansed by Turkey during WWI."

The Armenians fled and the Nusra militants quickly got to work ransacking the churches in the area in a clear systematic effort to erase the very existence of that community.

The very same year Nusra expressed its genocidal intent against the Kurds of Syria. In [a fatwa](#) the group even encouraged its militants to rape Kurdish women, not unlike Islamic State (ISIS) infamously did against Yazidi Kurdish women in Sinjar the following year.

"Kurds are kufar (unbelievers) and killing Kurds, taking their women, plundering their property and destroying of their homes is just and fair," read the fatwa text.

Turkey's Syrian militia proxies presently fighting the YPG, under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), showcased a similar penchant for such cruelty and sadism when they [mutilated](#) the corpse of a member of the Kurdish Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

When Nusra, and later ISIS, were in control of the northern border town of Tal Abyad (known as Gire Spi to Kurds) Turkey raised no objections. When the YPG pushed out the latter in the summer of 2015, however, Ankara [accused the group of ethnic cleansing](#).

Today, as Turkey invades Rojava's most far-flung and vulnerable territory it's clear, if these precedents are anything to go by, that it's willing to permit atrocities against the Kurds which could ultimately result in ethnic cleansing.