

A blood-soaked olive: what is the situation in Afrin today?

by Anthony Avice Du Buisson - 06/10/2018 01:23



Afrin Canton in Syria's northwest was once a haven for thousands of people fleeing the country's civil war. Consisting of beautiful fields of olive trees scattered across the region from Rajo to Jindires, locals harvested the land and made a living on its rich soil. This changed when the region came under Turkish occupation this year.

Operation Olive Branch:

Under the governance of the Afrin Council – a part of the 'Democratic Federation of Northern Syria' (DFNS) – the region was relatively stable. The council's members consisted of locally elected officials from a variety of backgrounds, such as Kurdish official Aldar Xelil who formerly co-headed the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEVDEM) – a political coalition of parties governing Northern Syria. Children studied in their mother tongue— Kurdish, Arabic, or Syriac— in a country where the Ba'athists once banned Kurdish education. The local Self-Defence Forces (HXP) worked in conjunction with the People's Protection Units (YPG) to keep the area

secure from existential threats such as Turkish Security forces (TSK) and Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacks.

This arrangement continued until early 2018, when Turkey unleashed a full-scale military operation called ' Operation Olive Branch' to oust TEVDEM from Afrin. The Turkish government views TEVDEM and its leading party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – listed as a terrorist organisation in Turkey. Under the pretext of defending its borders from terrorism, the Turkish government sent thousands of troops into Afrin with the assistance of forces from its allies in Idlib and its occupied Euphrates Shield territories. This forced the Afrin Council into exile and pushed out Afrin's residents as well as its defenders. TSK and Turkish-backed FSA (TFSA) bombarded the region and eventually took control of Afrin city on March 18th – claiming victory.

During the bombardment campaign that was committed by Turkish artillery and aircraft, thousands of people lost their homes. Many civilians fled to nearby regions, mainly Shahba, to seek refuge away from the fighting. YPG and HXP defended what areas they could, but made a tactical decision to withdraw in order to protect civilians. Those fighters who stayed are resisting the occupation, with some forming groups like the 'Afrin Falcons' to assassinate targets within the TFSA.

Seven months on from the completion of Turkey's military operation, Afrin remains under Turkish occupation. Thousands of former residents are displaced and now live outside the region in refugee camps, such as the camps in Shahba. Deprived of basic necessities, such as running water, and cut off from electricity, life for these displaced civilians is hard. They are unable to return to their homes because the fighters that took Afrin either destroyed the houses during the process of invasion or are outright looting and occupying them.

Under the Turkish government's watchful eye, these TFSA fighters occupying Afrin are taking personal items left by fleeing civilians. After looting the homes, the fighters then settle in with their families. Adding insult to injury, the Turkish government rewards them with Turkish citizenship and helps facilitate the safe passage of fighters of Jaysh al-Islam and other opposition forces, escaping places like East Ghouta, into Afrin.

Hundreds of thousands of families from Syria's southwestern Ghouta and Daraa regions accompany these fighters. Through the Turkish government's 'resettlement policy', thousands of Syrian refugees within its borders are being resettled in Afrin and Euphrates Shield territories. This resettlement policy has impacted upon the once predominantly Kurdish Afrin canton. Kurdish homes are now filling with Arab families in what appears to be a concerted effort by the Turkish government to shift

the demographics of the region.

Schools that once taught Kurdish along with other languages as part of the curriculum now are reducing access to the learning of the language. Kurdish teachers are being replaced by Arab ones. In schools in places like al-Caviz, the Kurdish language is no longer taught. Children are instead taught an Arab-centric curriculum reminiscent of the Baath regime's curriculum system. However, praise of Assad has been replaced with praise of Erdogan – as evident in the Turkish propaganda videos coming from the school.

Ethnic Cleansing in Afrin:

During the initial days of the operation, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan made clear that his government would resettle Syrian Arab refugees living in Turkey:

“The whole issue is this: 55 percent of Afrin is Arab, 35 percent are the Kurds who were later relocated, and about seven percent are Turkmen. [We aim] to give Afrin back to its rightful owners.... We house about 3.5 million Syrians [as refugees]. We want to send them back to their land in no time...”

Afrin's population consists of predominantly Kurdish inhabitants who have lived in the region for centuries— long before the existence of the Turkish state. However, the Turkish president's statements are meant to revise history and justify state policy. Erdogan is not the first Turkish leader to revise history to justify state policy, especially when that policy is aimed at Kurds. When this revisionism is used to justify the displacement of thousands of people of a group from their original homelands, then there are grounds for claiming such action as 'ethnic cleansing'— a war crime.

History tells us that when there are signs of ethnic cleansing occurring, genocide is soon to follow. For example, during the Bosnian war, the Republic of Srpska forcefully displaced thousands of Bosnian Muslims and expelled these individuals from their homelands. In the following months, the occupation by Serbian forces in places such as Srebrenica turned violent and resulted in the deaths of thousands in what is classed today as a 'genocide'. Afrin is not near this stage yet, but it is important to keep in mind where ethnic cleansing often leads.

Turkish State Chauvinism

Demonstrating a disregard for facts and the original inhabitants of the region, Erdogan spent weeks— in preparation for the election no less— rallying the country behind the costly operation. Exploiting the fervour of the nation, Erdogan legitimised violence against critics by uniting ultranationalists and enforcing strict censorship laws within the country. This demonstration of Turkish chauvinism in the form of

ultranationalist legitimization was frightening. Even more frightening was the sheer extent to which critics within the country were locked up. Those daring to criticise the government's operation found themselves either arrested under charges of 'abetting terrorism' or beaten by ultranationalists.

Turkish chauvinism did not stop at the country's borders, but extended to the front lines as well. Soldiers on the front lines demonstrated their sense of eagerness for the operation through nationalist songs and displays of 'Grey Wolves' hand signs. Others displayed their pride through sadistic pleasure in the filming of tortured Afrin civilians and the draping of Turkish flags over conquered buildings. Some even burnt Kurdish flags on camera – a sign of anti-Kurdish sentiment that Erdogan claimed was not present.

When TFSA and TSK soldiers entered Afrin city, the Kurdish statue of blacksmith Kawa that had long been at the heart of the city was torn down, under claims that it was a statue of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Even ancient structures were not spared in the offensive, with the temple of Ain Dara facing damage by Turkish aircraft. The level of destruction brought upon monuments of once great ancient civilisations in Syria throughout this Syrian war is saddening. US Senator Hiram Johnson was once purported to have said the line, 'the first casualty, when war comes, is truth.' One might add that the second casualty of war is history.

Turkish Occupation:

After expelling the locally elected Afrin council and TEVDEM's government from Afrin, the region has come under new administration. Considered to fall under the control of the Hatay province in Turkey's southwest, officials appointed by the Turkish government are running the region in accordance with state policy. Each appointee placed in control of the canton is paid in Turkish Lira and is under supervision of TSK.

A 'local' interim council formed prior to the invasion are jointly administering the region with the Turkish government. This model of joint control has been adopted by other Turkish occupied areas such as those incorporating territories in 'Euphrates Shield' (Jarabulus-al-Bab pocket). The model shares similarities to the model adopted by Turkey and France for the Republic of Hatay in the 1930s. That was, of course, before the annexation of the state by Turkey in 1939. It would not be surprising if a 'Turkish Republic of Northern Syria' were to form, in the same vein as the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' and other occupied areas when Turkish control is finally consolidated.

The annexation of Afrin by Turkey reflects the ideology of neo-Ottomanism that is supported by a large segment of Turkish nationalists within the country. There is a

longing by thousands of Turkish citizens for the reestablishment of Turkey as a global power. A desire for Turkey to reclaim its history and establish control over former Ottoman states in the Middle East. This sense of nationalism extends to religious institutions, with Turkish imams— and Erdogan— attempting to ‘persuade’ the Islamic world that Turkey is its protector and sole representative.

Military institutions were not left untouched by this ideology. Turkish foreign policy for the last couple decades in areas like Cyprus and Syria reflects this. The construction of military bases for long-term occupation under the guise of ‘combating terrorism’ and the establishment of an administration that does not reflect the local populace’s wishes suggests that there is something more sinister at play. When the Turkish-backed administration is taking orders from Ankara, considered essentially to be a de-facto part of Turkey, paying its employees in Turkish lira and giving fighters citizenship, what is really on display is imperialism. The development of Turkish infrastructure in Afrin only demonstrates this further.

Silence and Violence:

The international community has been silent about Turkey’s military operation and occupation of Afrin. Calls of ‘deep concern’ were repeatedly uttered throughout the conduct of the operation, but little was done. No emergency United Nations Security Council meeting was held, nor did any nation prevent Turkey. Overall, the international community was complicit in Turkey’s operation. This was not surprising given the strategic ‘importance’ of Turkey as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Continuing a long trend by western governments in remaining silent about the injustices committed by their allies, well condemning those of their enemies. Protesters across the world took to the streets to do what their governments would not do.

Resistance continues in Afrin to oust the occupation army from continuing to control the region. The attacks continue to target those abetting the occupation forces, which extends to those officials assisting Turkey. Explosive mines left from the fighting also continue to kill TSK and TFSA forces. The YPG has sworn to retake Afrin from Turkey, although this occupation is unlikely to end any time soon. With the Idlib offensive on the horizon for the regime in Damascus, Turkish forces are being spread out across the occupation zones, from Idlib to al-Bab.

The relationship between the guarantors of Syria— Russia, Turkey and Iran— continues to fluctuate as Turkey gambles on what to do in Idlib. The occupation of territories within Syria has been costly on Turkey and the prospect of an offensive against Idlib only exacerbates the situation. Erdogan wants to remain perceived as a ‘strong leader’ externally with the spread of military might, well simultaneously

clamping down on increasing dissent internally. This arrangement will not last forever.

The war in Syria is now in its seventh year. Hundreds of thousands of people are dead and more than two million people have been displaced. The world continues to watch as humanitarian crisis after humanitarian crisis continues, unchallenged and without clear sign of ceasing. Dictators continue to control the country with little response from the international community. The blood of Syria's people continues to be shed.

Despite the death, destruction and devastation wrought upon the country, there are signs of development and progress. In northeastern Syria, people are building up communities and choosing to live. There might be the threat of invasion by Turkey to the north and a regime invasion from the south, but this does not deter the spirit of these people. Children play in the streets of Kobane – a city once devastated by Daesh – with joy, Arab and Kurdish families in Manbij coexist with one another. These are flashes of light in the darkness. These lights are sometimes all that are needed to establish hope for the future.