How to recognize a war when you see one

About the war of Turkish fascism with low intensity against the liberated regions in Kurdistan

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How to recognize a war when you see one.

About the war of Turkish fascism with low intensity against the liberated regions in Kurdistan (Rojava, Qandîl, Şengal…)

No waiting for day X!

I. Introduction

Since the "ceasefire" of 17 October 2019 and the end of the classical military attack of the Turkish forces in the war against Rojava, the war against the Kurds in Turkey, Syria and Iraq has never stopped. It took on a new form combining three forms of war theorised by strategists: Low intensity warfare, hybrid warfare and compound warfare. Classical military actions were limited and supplemented by a variety of hostile actions. These include targeted attacks, crop burning, targeted bombing by drones, attacks by proxies, provocation of mass exodus, etc. In six weeks of "ceasefire" after 17 October 2019, the Turkish Armed Forces carried out 143 attacks on rural areas in Rojava, 42 drone bombings, 147 medium bombs and artillery bombs. They raided 88 places, killed hundreds of people and displaced 64,000 people.

Not only for the media, but also within the Rojava movement, the prevailing feeling was that the war was "suspended". Rojava is hardly in the news any more, at most the solidarity movement is doubting and preparing for the "Great War", the “big” offensive of the Turkish armed forces against Rojava.

The study presented here analyses the hostile actions carried out during several months of the "ceasefire" at the end of 2019 by Turkey and its proxies against Rojava. This analysis is important because these are not individual cases but components of a well thought-through and planned strategy. This does not only concern Rojava but, as we will see, also

other liberated regions of Kurdistan (like the Qandîl Mountains in Iraq) or spaces where the liberation movement enables the liberation and self-organisation of the people (the Mexmûr refugee camp, the region of the Yezidis of Şengal in Iraq, etc.). This form of warfare can continue and is a deadly threat to the liberated regions of Kurdistan. The solidarity movement with Rojava must understand this threat and learn to respond to it.

II. The change of strategy

It is unclear why Turkey deviated in 2019 from a strategy of total war (with direct and massive intervention by the Turkish army and air force) to a low intensity war strategy. Considerations of international politics may have had an influence. The resistance of Serêkaniyê in October 2019, which showed that the SDF was better prepared than during the Battle of Afrin (January to March 2018), may also have had an influence to change the strategy.

The war currently [2020] being waged by Turkey against Rojava combines three characteristics:

- It is a "low intensity" war, Turkey is deliberately not using all its military power.
- It is a "coupled" war: Turkey acts more through proxies than through its own armed forces.
- It is a "hybrid" war: Turkey combines conventional and non-conventional means and political, economic and military action (for example, financing a non-profit organisation can be a strategic element). Hybrid warfare takes place both on conventional battlefields and among populations in the conflict zone and the international community. Almost all counterinsurgency wars are hybrid wars.

Before discussing the various aspects of this new form of war against the liberated regions of Kurdistan (mainly against Rojava and the Qandîl Mountains), it should be noted that several of its features existed before the "ceasefire" of October 2019. Turkey has always used proxies and

unconventional means. What characterises the new phase are the methods that were complementary and now became strategic.

III. Turkey’s methods of warfare

1. The use of proxies

Proxies are more economic (i.e. cheaper) and politically less dangerous. They are not always 100% controllable (some war crimes committed by proxies may be partly planned and calculated by Turkish politics, others may simply be initiatives of proxies).
Three types of proxies can be distinguished: direct proxies (groups that are directly dependent on Turkey, such as the Jaysh al-Sharqiya militia of the Free Syrian Army FSA), mercenaries (such as the Sultan Murad Division, which is so dependent that the Turkish state sent them to Libya in January 2020 to defend its interests there) and other warring parties with political autonomy but whose interests coincide with those of Turkey (and who receive aid from Turkey), such as Daesh.

2. Classic military attacks

The classic military attacks continue. They are rare enough to give the impression that they are exceptions or accidents, but sufficient and effective enough to have a strategic function of weakening the general progressive resistance. The largest of these operations combine air strikes, ground assaults and helicopter attacks.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the Turkish army carried out several major operations in the late 1990s (Operation "Steel" from March to May 1995, Operation "Hammer" from May to July 1997 and Operation "Dawn" from September to October 1997), and a new operation was carried out in February 2008 (Operation "Sun"). However, since 28 May 2019, an operation has been in progress, which has been running for considerably longer periods, with varying intensity, under the name "Claw". These combined operations (bombing and ground attack) were renewed in the region this year [2020].

3. Demographic change

The aim is to provoke population movements in line with Turkey's strategic interests. These movements will take place in two stages:

- First, the local population is displaced. The exodus of Assyrian Christians in Syria was provoked by a combination of harassment, threats, terror (e.g. pictures of prisoners crucified by FSA militia soldiers).
- Subsequently, the regions occupied by Turkish forces were repopulated: Syrian, Sunni and Arab refugees were resettled in strategic areas. After the Turkish offensive of January 2018, 140,000 people fled from Afrin to find refuge in the other cantons of Rojava. Turkey then settled more than 160,000 Sunni Arabs in the canton of Afrin. These came from Ghuta, Idlib and other regions that the Syrian regime had taken over from the Islamists. In this way, Turkey methodically and systematically changed the demographic structure of the region to eradicate the Kurdish presence. The majority of these settlers are volunteers, families of displaced persons or refugees who have lost everything. They are offered a perspective in their new location, they are given land and houses, which are financed by Turkey but also by German banks and NGOs. Other Syrian refugees were forced to move there and took up the role of settlers. For example, they had to sign documents in Turkish that they did not understand.

4. Attacks on the economy in the unoccupied regions

In these areas, the economy is systematically targeted. The aim is to weaken the potential for material and moral resistance and to provoke contradictions within society by making life difficult for people. We can distinguish the following:

- Direct attacks such as the burning of grain in Rojava in May 2019: the fires were sometimes caused by Daesh, who also took

responsibility for them, and sometimes by the fire of Turkish artillery.

- The blockade like the one that isolates Rojava from Iraqi Kurdistan, a blockade set up by the forces of the Kurdish regional government of the Barzani clan, which is closely linked to Turkish interests. Since summer 2020, the effects of this blockade have been reinforced by the US sanctions against Assad and Russia's veto in the UN on open border crossings.

5. Attacks on the economy of the occupied regions

The destruction is also taking place in the occupied regions and has two objectives, depending on the zone:

- One objective is to make living conditions impossible in areas managed by the autonomous regional authorities. This should contribute to the depopulation of the areas. For example, on 5 December 2019 a convoy of Turkish soldiers dismantled the Mabruka and al-Bawab substation, which led to the collapse of electricity supplies in the region.
- Turkey aims to prevent economic autonomy of the occupied territories in order to make the population groups dependent on economic exchange with the occupying power. In Afrin, the proxies uprooted olive trees, the main source of income for the population. They immediately benefited from this operation because from now on olives and oil had to be imported from Turkey. In this way they achieve that the region is economically dependent on Turkey.

This process was already applied by Turkey's allies in Aleppo: Before the civil war, one of the goals of local politics in Aleppo was to build up an economy that was as independent as possible. To achieve this, public investment was combined with strict import controls. With this strategy the city developed into a centre of the Syrian textile industry. During the war until the city was reconquered by Syrian government troops, the Islamists allied with Turkey dismantled the industry in order to open the Syrian market to Turkish products.

6. Control of strategic points

The low intensity war that the Turkish army is waging against the liberated Iraqi regions of Kurdistan is not only manifested by bombing (including with chemical weapons) and raids by commandos against the Qandîl Mountains, but also by the creation of numerous bases to encircle and strangle the liberated regions. The first of these bases was installed in 1997. At that time, hundreds of Kurdish demonstrators protested against the military bases and the bombings. Unarmed, they attacked the base of Shiladze (Duhok province) and set fire to military vehicles. By June 2018, there were already 13 large Turkish bases in the Qandîl region, as well as a number of small peripheral stations.

7. Attacks on the IT front

Turkey is also attacking the Kurdish liberation movement in the field of IT. These attacks against communication can be distinguished by their nature (hardware attacks or IT attacks) and by their target (field communication or news media communicating towards the outside world). An example of this is the Twitter offensive before the Turkish attacks of 9 October 2019, when a large number of Twitter accounts were created to send Pro-Turkish propaganda into the Twittersphere.

8. Terror and targeted assassinations

Terrorist attacks and targeted assassinations are also part of the repertoire of the Turkish state. The former are more likely to be carried out by proxies, for example on 11 November 2019, when three simultaneous explosions in Qamişlo, a city with a Kurdish majority, killed six people and injured 42. The Turkish state, however, is directly responsible for the targeted killings. Thus, the Turkish secret service MIT assassinated the member of the Central Committee of MLKP and leader of MLKP-Rojava Bayram Namaz (Baran Serhat) with a bomb in his car on 23 March 2019.

This category can be completed with the military bombings, whose main aim is the terrorisation of the population and its displacement. These include the military bombing of the market in Tel Rifat on 2 December 2019, which targeted the people who had fled from Afrin to Rojava. This bombing killed ten civilians, including eight children.

Terror is also the rule in occupied territories: Kidnappings, assassinations, rapes and looting are commonplace for the population of Afrin and Serêkaniyê.

9. Economic and infrastructural investments

Like any war, composite war aims at peace, but peace in a political situation which has been transformed. Economic and infrastructural investments, which are labelled as "development programs", fall within this framework: There are "new towns", schools and roads, subsidies for NGOs and their local associations, etc. Turkey has already implemented this policy in Northern Kurdistan (the South-East of Turkey). Whole parts of the Sûr district, the historical centre of Diyarbakir, were razed to the ground after the abolition of autonomy. In 2015, 6,000 Kurdish families were expelled and are not allowed to return there. In March 2016 the Council of Ministers was dismissed. The Turkish state thus created the possibility for the expropriation of private land. 6,292 flats, municipal public buildings and Christian cultural heritage were taken away from the local population.

10. Political and ideological alliances

To build their "peace", the forces of aggression must be able to rely on a network of collaborators. This network is acquired through collusion of interests, direct corruption or ideological affinity. Obviously, reactionary and patriarchal forces in particular are potentially part of this network. In Syria, for Turkey their collaborators are the Islamist forces, but also feudal tribal structures; in Iraq they are the KDP of the Barzani clan.

11. Propaganda

Propaganda is an essential element of this war, which does not want to appear as such. The propaganda action is direct (through channels openly associated with Turkey and its allies) or indirect (through apparently neutral media). On the one hand, specifically selected information is disseminated. On the other hand, disinformation plays an important role, spreading false accusations, direct lies and well-researched and credible rumours. These are aimed at the media, political forces and European NGOs. Some examples are:

- Provocations and "false flag" operations: crimes committed by Turkish forces or allies are attributed to Kurdish forces.
- staged humanitarian operations which present the Turkish occupation as beneficial to the population.

12. Legal "anti-terrorism" products

One of the great advantages for the occupier of this low-intensity war is that he can present himself as a police force instead of a warring force. On the legal level, this deprives the resistance of all the protective measures of martial law. The occupying power can also invoke the anti-terror law at national and international level, in particular by referring to international agreements on "ceasefire", in order to stigmatise the actions of the resistance. In this way, Turkey makes sure USA and the European powers will condemn the resistance forces. Members of the resistance forces are also threatened with the refusal or withdrawal of political refugee status. This may result in extradition to Turkey or imprisonment in Europe.

13. Strategic depth measures

The Turkish war is not limited to Kurdistan. It is spreading everywhere where the movement for Kurdish national liberation has forces and allies, and in the neighbouring regions of Kurdistan. In this sense, the agents of Turkey are also trying to isolate the solidarity movement in Europe and elsewhere: They use press campaigns and lobbying for the

criminalisation of Kurdish organisations or those of the Turkish revolutionary left, etc.

IV. Historical precedents

Turkey did not invent the strategy of low intensity wars against the liberated peoples. This strategy was used by several dominant powers to weaken a liberated country in connection with a classical invasion or as a "second choice" strategy after the failure of an invasion.

We will give just two examples:
Cuba: The USA practised the same mixture of economic sabotage, assassinations and spreading rumours. In early 1960, for example, 300,000 tonnes of sugar cane were burned in various parts of the country. Supporters of the revolution were deliberately murdered, especially rural literacy workers. In December 1960, rumours were systematically spread by the CIA and the church that Fidel Castro wanted to send young people to camps in the USSR for indoctrination. This caused panic in families, which led to more than 14,000 children being brought to the USA by Cuban exiles. According to Cuban estimates, the low-intensity war caused 3,478 deaths, 2,099 life-long disability and a total of US$ 181.1 billion in property damage.

Mozambique: After the liberation of the country from Portuguese colonial power in 1975, South Africa started a low intensity war against the country. The reason for this was that South Africa was afraid that the country would serve as a base for movements against apartheid. With the ReNaMo, South Africa and Rhodesia maintained a guerrilla force that killed almost a million people and devastated Mozambique in fifteen years. One consequence of this was that by 1986 it had become the poorest country in the world.

Other examples such as Nicaragua could be cited. During the Cold War, the effects of these low-intensity wars were somewhat offset through interventions by the USSR or China. Nevertheless, these wars had a strong impact on the societies they targeted. On the one hand, directly

through the deaths and destruction, and on the other hand indirectly, by tying up resources for the construction and reproduction of society.

V. The Israeli model

The powers that are confronted with one or more peoples hostile to their rule have adopted this low-intensity war strategy instead of total genocide. We have seen the principles of it – a war which pretends not to be one – from the republican districts of Belfast to the Bantustans in South Africa. It's also the strategy Israel is using against the Palestinians. Palestinians are fractionalised in economically unviable areas, surrounded by settlements, walls, military bases, dependent on the Israelis for water and electricity. All attempts of resistance are brutally and effectively crushed, but with sufficient precision and discretion so that this everyday war against an entire people appears as a simple security operation.

Israeli techniques are imitated by the Turkish state down to the last detail:

- The destruction of the houses of the family of a person accused of being a member of the resistance. Thus, in the first week of December 2019, the Turkish military and the Islamists of the FSA razed their houses to the ground with dynamite as a punitive measure against alleged followers of the SDF. In the Kurdish village of Gora Maza, about 30 kilometres from Girê Spî, they flattened houses with construction machines.
- The construction of a "security wall": Starting in 2005, Israel built a "wall of security" that demarcates the Palestinian territories. The barrier follows roughly the 1967 border for more than 700 km, but often penetrates into the West Bank to integrate Jewish settlements. Based on this model, Turkey built a 564 km long wall in 2017-2018 using mobile concrete blocks 2 metres wide and 3 metres high, each weighing 7 tonnes.
- The plan to create a 30 km deep security zone along the Turkish-Syrian border, occupied by displaced persons and managed by forces allied with Turkey, is also based on a strategy already used

by Israel. In 1978-2000, Israel established a 20 km deep border strip along the border with Lebanon. This was equipped by Israel. The Lebanese army waged a dirty war there (with torture centres and extra-judicial executions) against Lebanese and Palestinian resistance.

- Controlling the population by controlling water: At the time of the Oslo agreements, Israel declared that 80% of the water was used by them and 20% by the Palestinians. In zones A (under Palestinian Authority) and B (under mixed regime), Palestinian cities are in principle supplied by the Israeli water company. However, in summer, the water in the river is insufficient and the Palestinian authorities have to ration it. Palestinians living in Zone C (67% of the West Bank), where Israel exercises absolute military and civilian control, have to live on 20 litres of water per person per day. This includes water for agriculture.

Since the beginning of the Turkish offensive, it has been a strategic objective of Turkey to control the water supply for the population of Rojava. On 10 October 2019, the Bouzra dam, which supplies water to the town of Dêrik, was targeted by the Turkish air force, while the water supply to the town of Hassaké was interrupted due to damage to the Alok water treatment plant. The latter supplies water to 400,000 people in the region.

VI. Conclusion

The solidarity movement with Rojava must not lose sight of the possibility of a new large-scale offensive against Rojava - like the one against Afrin. We do not know how long the current phase, which began at the end of 2019, will last. What we do know is that the low-intensity war that is currently being waged by Turkey against all the liberated areas of Kurdistan (Rojava, Qandîl, etc.) is a strong, continuous and varied aggression. In order to offer resistance, it takes a lot of effort, means, intelligence and determination. International solidarity can and must be a decisive support for this resistance, provided that it is strong, continuous and diverse.