

A cry of anguish from Syria's most important Kurdish politician



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This winter was dark and cruel in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and summer promises to be just as bleak. As it approaches, the Kurds fear that the sacrifices they made in the fight against ISIS are being forgotten. Washington's dramatic shift in priorities and lack of strategic direction have also left them feeling worried about the future of U.S. support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at a time when it is needed the most.

Overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Israel's military operations in Gaza, Syria's ongoing conflict that has led to widespread hunger and poverty, mass

displacement and surge in infectious diseases no longer garners headlines. And neither does Turkey's relentless shelling of civilian-populated areas and key infrastructure in northeastern Syria, home to ethnic Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and other communities.

"Attacks on civilians have never been ignored to such an extent by the mainstream media. They are totally ignoring what is happening in North and East Syria", says Ilham Ahmed, Syria's most prominent Kurdish politician and co-Chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). "Turkey is targeting civilian infrastructure aimed at forcing the local population to flee, expelling the Kurds from these areas and creating a Sunni Arab-majority zone, 30 kilometres deep, along the Syrian border. The ultimate goal of the Turkish government is to impose demographic change in northern Syria. They want to change the demographic component of our region".

Ankara claims the airstrikes are targeting SDF and Syrian Armed Forces positions. However, prominent NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and local media say most of the strikes are inflicting damage on populated areas and critical infrastructure including power plants, petrol and water stations, food production and storage facilities, schools and roads frequently used by civilians and aid groups.

"The strikes have severely disrupted power for over 3 million people and water supply for 1.5 million in the region, while there are nearly 80,000 children out of school due to damage to school buildings. Turkey also struck grain storage facilities in the area that supply grains to local bakeries", says Ahmed, and adds: "The attacks have affected many other institutions across North and East Syria that look after the safety and security of the community. We are deeply worried about losing the ability to protect our community from threats".

A newly released report¹ by the UN Commission of Inquiry has found that Turkish aerial attacks on infrastructure such as power plants are "in violation of international humanitarian law". Moreover, the report notes that "civilians were also killed in targeted aerial attacks fitting a pattern of Turkish drone strikes" and concludes that "such strikes may amount to war crimes".

According to Ahmed, Turkey is acting indiscriminately and without restraint. She believes that the Turkish government should be held accountable for war crimes but argues that impunity is the main challenge that urgently needs to be addressed.

"We believe that Turkey, Hakan Fidan and others should be taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for the crimes they have committed and continue to commit against the Kurds in our region and in Turkey. But unfortunately, no one is attempting to take Turkey to the ICJ to defend the Kurdish people. Many countries in the West and in the region have huge economic interests, commercial

ties and military cooperation with Turkey and are more inclined to protect and prioritise their own interests”.

Without mincing her words, Ahmed compares the international community’s largely subdued reaction to Turkey’s military operations in northeast Syria with the harsh response that Israel’s operations in Gaza triggered, arguing that there is a tendency towards applying “selective moralism” to the protection and survival of the Kurdish people.

“It is deeply regrettable what is happening in Gaza. But how international organisations and institutions have reacted, exposes the double standards and how biased they are to conflicts in different parts of the world. The international community should be honest and fair towards the crimes that are being committed against our population and shouldn’t be biased when it comes to international conflicts and the human rights abuses committed by states. Just because of economic interests, the international community shouldn’t ignore the suffering of the people in our region”.

Ahmed’s words reflect a sentiment shared by many Kurds in the AANES and abroad. There is a sense of abandonment and resentment for the lack of gratitude having suffered thousands of casualties in the fight against ISIS. “We are the ones who protected the international community and have been an ally of western powers in the fight against ISIS. We fought this fight honourably and now we are completely let down”, says Ahmed in a sorrowful and disappointed tone. As the Kurds see it, this reads like one more chapter in the long history of betrayal at the hands of world powers.

Grieving the loss of life and land, the Kurds have had to find the courage and strength to keep fighting against all odds to fulfil their dream of building a more democratic future for the Middle East. And the social and political liberation of women is at the heart of the Kurdish movement. As a reformer and after decades of tirelessly championing women’s rights and Kurdish self-determination, Ahmed knows all too well about the fragility of solidarity. While *hevaltî* (comradeship) and support for the Kurdish struggle in the early years of the Syrian conflict were extremely powerful, thirteen years later “fatigue” appears to have set in.

Long gone are the days when the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ) were making headlines in Europe and the US following the fierce resistance and heroic victory of the Kurdish forces against ISIS in Kobanê, a border town along Syria’s northern frontier with Turkey, in January 2015. It was the striking emergence of an all-women, secular military force in the Middle East that has led to a flurry of sensationalist stories on “badass” Kurdish women and has given rise to the phenomenon of the

fearless female warrior celebrated for their battlefield prowess. But, this superficial and misplaced narrative overlooked the great transformation that was taking place in the region with Kurdish women at the forefront. Their “global task”, as Ahmed describes it: “a call to all women around the world to unite, take their destiny in their own hands and protect their rights, themselves and their future”.

Self-aware and eloquent, Ahmed’s eyes light up when she talks about the achievements of the Kurdish women’s movement. However, she does not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead and asserts that “women have the right to be protected and have to learn how to protect themselves especially in conflict zones”. Asked about the October 7th attacks which saw dozens of Israeli women being subjected to sexual violence, Ahmed says: “It was heartbreaking to see what happened on October 7th and the suffering that these women endured. We, as Kurdish women, have suffered immensely because of this kind of practices i.e. rape, forced marriages and other conflict-related crimes against women that took place in our region”.

It’s clear that Ahmed is more interested in speaking the truth than being politically and ideologically palatable. She explains that she doesn’t see any difference between Hamas and Turkey-backed groups in Syria as both “use similar tactics to spread fear and subdue women”.

“The suffering that women endure during conflicts whether it is Kurdish women, Turkish women, Persian women or any other women, is the same. The pain is the same. And the reason why these crimes are committed against women is the same. Always committed by men who see themselves as dominant. And they are allowed to commit these crimes but shouldn’t be allowed. Men should never be allowed to commit such crimes anywhere in the world”, says Ahmed with resolve.

Syria remains a deeply divided and violent country and Ahmed understands that the longer the war drags on, the more likely things will not play out in the AANES’ favour. If Rojava is to survive, the Kurds must staunchly oppose any attempts by the actors involved in the conflict to belittle and disregard the role of the Kurds in Syria. But this isn’t a path laid with rose petals. The road to political settlement and peaceful coexistence in Syria where the Kurds “play a leading role in establishing a new order in the Middle East” is littered with obstacles and shattered dreams.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-march2024>