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### ROJAVA: TURKISH OCCUPATION OF AFRIN MEANS CREEPING ANNEXATION AND ETHNIC CLEANSING

**S**ince seizing Afrin Canton on 18 March last, Turkey has been carrying out in this territory a policy of population displacement and ethnic cleaning that seems to be preparing the way for straight forward annexation.

In international law these actions constitute war crimes — but this unprecedented situation, where a NATO member turns his back on all the theoretical values of the Alliance, generated almost no concrete reaction from any other NATO members or even of UNO... At the beginning of April the Human Rights defence

organisation *Human Rights Watch (HRW)* published a report on Turkey's invasion that emphasised the number of civilian deaths. Taking the example of one air strike (out of dozens) which killed 26 civilians, 17 of whom were children, this NGO concluded that the responsibility of the Turkish Army was total, since it in no way sought to avoid civilian deaths. This has not prevented Turkey from cynically writing, in its reply to the European Commission's evaluation of its application for membership, that its "Olive Tree Branch" was "*an example of the way to fight terrorism without causing any harm to civilians*".

In reality, the Turkish troops and their Syrian auxiliaries behave like an army of occupation, locking up any residents they suspect of being pro-PYD, displacing whole families, preventing them from returning to their homes, particularly in the villages, extorting a "right of passage" at control points... The fighters of the so-called "Free Syrian Army" (FSA), mostly Jihadists, continue their plundering, kidnapping civilians (like Dr. Ebdulmecîd Sêxo, Dean of the Arts Faculty) often demanding a ransom from their families, committing rapes and other abuses of power. On the 20<sup>th</sup> the inhabitants testified that some

pro-Turkish fighters occupying Yezidi villages behaved just like ISIS or al-Qaida, dynamiting the temples, dragging the inhabitants to the mosque demanding their conversion before affording them supplies (*Rojinfo*). On the 28<sup>th</sup> 11 Yezidis of Afrin were kidnapped from their homes by armed men wearing masks... While the names of several Yezidi villages have been replaced by names of a more Sunni sounding, Turkey has also brought its prohibition of the Kurdish language, replacing in the city many signs to introduce Turkish instead. While one Jihadist group has emptied the silos, there is now rumour of selling the food to war profiteers, away from the propagandist cameras showing some free distributions. In the strategic village of Qudah (Qada), straddling the border the Turkish troops have pulled up hundreds of olive trees (*Afrin media centre*).

The pro-Damascus militia have taken advantage of the situation to do some extorting themselves demanding “rights of passage” from displaced (up to 1,000 US\$ per person), and preventing many from entering Aleppo. According to UN estimates, when the pro-Turkish militia entered Afrin there were still 50,000 to 70,000 people living there, since 137,000 others had preferred to flee. Since then Turkey has been carrying out a policy of changing the Canton’s ethnic composition by bringing Jihadist fighters and their families from Idlib as well as 1,000 evacuated at the beginning of the month from Eastern Ghouta, especially from the Douma region. Some of the civilians rehoused in Kurdish houses have expressed their disagreement and, on the 29<sup>th</sup> clashes have broken out when some of the newcomers refused to hand over their arms to pro-Turkish fighters.

Denouncing the “media blackout” in which this ethnic cleaning is being carried out by Turkey (*Rojinfo*), the UK-based Centre for Human Rights in Syria (CHRS) (although generally considered close to the opposition) called on UNO to “ensure the return (of civilians) to their homes and their security”. On the 19<sup>th</sup> the UN Office for coordinating humanitarian affairs indirectly accused the Turkish Army and its auxiliaries of preventing displaced people from having access to humanitarian aid, while some families, including pregnant women and babies, were stranded, without basic needs, between the Syrian and Turkish held areas. On the 27<sup>th</sup> the Kurdish Red Crescent pointed out that 2,800 diabetics lacked medicines. The mines laid by ISIS in some villages of Shehba or Afrin are causing more and more casualties. On the 28<sup>th</sup> the former leader of the PYD, Salih Muslim, appealed to UNO to protect residents wishing to return home. Denouncing the future dangers of the population manipulations taking place, he stressed the necessity for “international pressure on Turkey” to stop its “unforeseeable actions” (*Deutsche Welle*). In the Shehba region the Rojava administration had opened 6 camps, with a capacity of 10 to 40,000 places each: Tell Rifat, Fafînê, Ehres, Kefernayê, Sherawa and Nûbûl-Zehra (Aleppo province). In Aleppo itself there are said to be 100,000 displaced persons.

As at Azaz and Jerablous, following its recent operations Turkey has installed in Afrin on the 12<sup>th</sup> and in Jandairis on the 19<sup>th</sup> local Councils that appear to be only smokescreens hiding a Turkish colonial administration that, in practice, annexes the Canton to the Turkish province of Gaziantep. It was in this town that was recently held the

“Congress for the liberation of Afrin”, under remote-control by Turkey, to which some anti-PYD Kurdish parties accepted to take part. This, obviously, revived inter-Kurdish dissensions: the parties that had accepted the PYD’s democratic autonomy attack the former as traitors. The PYD had asked the ENKS (Kurdish National Council in Syria) to leave the Syrian National Coalition when the latter expressed its support for the Turkish offensive — which the former had refused, merely suspending, temporarily, its membership of the Syrian National Council during the Turkish operation. However, 16 Kurdish parties, including the Kurdish Left Party and the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria, published a common declaration declaring “the Assembly formed at Gaziantep under the supervision of the MIT” (the Turkish Secret Services) to be illegitimate. After the setting up of pro-Turkish local Councils, the pro-PYD organisations denounced certain members of the ENKS as “collaborators” and partly responsible for the deaths of 1,500 fighters and civilians fallen during the invasion, and called on the ENKS and the *Yekîti* party to exclude them. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Faysal Yusuf, a member of the ENKS, was arrested at his home in Qamişlo (*Rûdaw*). On the 6<sup>th</sup> a Rojava court issued warrants of arrest against Ibrahim Biro, former President of ENKS and Fuad Eliko, the ENKS representative on the Syrian National Coalition (ANF). They are accused of complicity with the Turkish operation. On the 9<sup>th</sup> the ENKS, following a meeting held the day before, called for the expulsion from Afrin of the Turkish Army and its Syrian auxiliaries and demanded the guarantee of an “international protection”. On the 13<sup>th</sup> Ne’mat Dawûd, Secretary of the Party of

Kurdish Democratic Reality and member of the ENKS Presidency, was arrested at Qamishlo.

The taking of Afrin did not end the pressure exerted by Turkey on the rest of Rojava, far from it... For the last two weeks President Erdogan has been loudly declaring that his next objective is Manbij, 100 km to the East. However the forces of the anti-ISIS Coalition are stationed there — Americans, French and, according to the SCHR, British, recently reinforced by fresh men and heavy artillery. Turkey has thus started a psychological war against the coalition — of which it is a member! For the second time since July 2017 the State news agency *Anatolia* published information on the positions of Western troops in Rojava... This occurs in the context of fresh confusion over the US policy towards Syria, since President Trump has just contradicted his own Army leaders (on 29<sup>th</sup> March and then again on 3<sup>rd</sup> April) by announcing the imminent of his troops, around 2,000 soldiers stationed in 4 bases. Turkey has also cut off Manbij's water supply by closing the Euphrates dam (which it had never done during the years when the town was occupied by ISIS), causing electric power cuts as well, and also closed the dams on the Bêlix (Bêlikh). Several farmers working in their fields were killed by cross-border firing. These threats provoked on the 7<sup>th</sup> anti-Turkish demonstrations in Manbij. On the 29<sup>th</sup> the Turkish Air Force bombed the village of Ashma, near Kobanê, without civilian casualties. In the same day Shervan Derwish, the spokesman of the Manbij, Military Council, declared on leaving hospital that he would not be intimidated. This was his first public statement since the attempt to assassinate him last

March, probably by a Turkish underling...

Since its attack on Afrin had allowed ISIS to re-inforce (it even regained territory South of Damascus) Turkey is increasingly regarded by its NATO allies as an objective ally of the Jihadists. This has reached the point where, on the 12<sup>th</sup> the future Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, strongly approved Senator Menendez when the latter told the Senate Foreign Affairs committee: "*Turkey is supposed to be our ally in NATO*" but it " *fights these very Kurds who enabled us to beat [ISIS]*", and that the Luxembourg Foreign Minister, Jean Asselborn, denouncing the Turkish invasion as a "factor of tensions and concern", demanded that it be discussed inside NATO.

The resurgence of ISIS is indeed worrying. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, an explosive device killed 2 fighters of the Coalition (one of whom was American) in Manbij and wounded 5 others. Since mid-March there have been regular clashes between ISIS and the Damascus Army near Deir Ezzor. Despite the Turkish threat, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) undertook to fight against ISIS, even proposing on the 4<sup>th</sup> common operations with the Iraqis. On the 18<sup>th</sup> they announced they had captured a Germano-Syrian jihadist suspected of being involved in the attacks of 22 September 2001 (*AFP*). On the 24<sup>th</sup> fighting between the SDF and ISIS restarted on the East bank of the Euphrates after SDF fighters returned from Afrin.

Another factor of tension, a chemical attack on Douma (East of Damascus) imputed to the regime on the 7<sup>th</sup> caused (according to the SCHR) 80 deaths, 40 by suffocation. This

provoked on the 14<sup>th</sup> retaliatory air strikes by the American, British and French forces. Damascus denied any responsibility, accusing the rebel group *Jaish al-Islam*. On the 29<sup>th</sup> Damascus's Army tried, unsuccessfully, to regain from the SDF several villages in Deir Ezzor province, losing 9 fighters and causing 6 deaths to their adversaries.

All through the month the solidarity with Afrin and Rojava was expressed in several countries, where demonstrations denouncing Turkey's aggression and the passive complicity of the international leaderships. On the 1<sup>st</sup>, a demonstration in London asked specifically that the sale of arms to Ankara be stopped and the return of the remains of British YPJ Ann Campbell (26 years old) killed on the 16<sup>th</sup> in a Turkish air strike. On the same day a demonstration took place at Lorient. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> a delegation from the British Parliament visited Rojava and held a press Conference at Qamishlo before going to Kobanê the next day. On the 4<sup>th</sup> a convoy of 18 lorries bringing supplies collected in Iraqi Kurdistan arrived. Other demonstrations took place in Switzerland at Bale and Berne. At Geneva, on the 5<sup>th</sup> an ultra-nationalist Turk tried to disrupt a Kurdish rally before fleeing in his car, lightly injuring 3 people. Other rallies took place in Italy (Venice, Leghorn and Florence), in Germany (Hamburg, Stuttgart, Munster and Hanover) and even as far as Australia (Melbourne).

Besides, the allies of the Syrian regime attracted the Turkish President's (verbal) thunderbolts by calling for the return of Afrin to Damascus: on the 5<sup>th</sup>, İbrahim Kalın, Mr. Erdogan's spokesman, retorted to the Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, that the Turkish

Army would remain in Afrin and, on the 10<sup>th</sup> Mr. Erdogan criticised the “mistaken approach” of Sergey Lavrov, who had made the same demand, by declaring “We know full well to whom we must give back Afrin. (...) Directly

to its inhabitants. (...) But the timing is up to us. We will decide that, not Mr. Lavrov”. Furthermore, still furious at the support expressed for the Rojavan Kurds by the French President at the end of March, Mr. Erdogan threatened

France on the 7<sup>th</sup>: “You support (the terrorists) by welcoming them to the Elysée Palace. (...) So long as the Western powers continue to support terrorists they will continue to be the targets of terrorist attacks in reaction”.

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## TURKEY: ARMY OPERATIONS ABROAD AND REPRESSION AT HOME KEEP ON INTENSIFYING

**T**he most important event of the month of April is certainly the announcement made on the 18<sup>th</sup> by the Turkish President that Presidential and Parliamentary elections would be held on 24 June next instead of 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2019. The announcement was made after a meeting with the head of the ultra-nationalist MHP party, Devlet Bahçeli, who had called for early elections last Tuesday... Some hours later, for the seventh time, the Turkish Parliament extended for another three months the State of Emergency that has been allowing the President to rule by decree since July 2016. The last date for filing candidature for the two elections was set at 4<sup>th</sup> May, which leaves little time to political parties to prepare, as noticed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Mr. Erdoğan doubtless wanted to catch any opponents short, but his decision is also an admission of weakness: his support is eroding and the economy is deteriorating...

Abroad Mr. Erdoğan pursues his anti-Kurdish military campaign — after Afrin the target will be Iraqi Kurdistan. At home the announcement of impending elections has launched a fresh increase in repression of the HDP, the principal Kurdish party in Turkey but also against whoever

represents a threat to power: journalists, academics, members of civil society, critical citizens... The headlong totalitarian flight continues. More than ever the Kurds are the main enemy, at home as abroad. It is true that, representing a fifth of the electorate they could upset the result, as their imprisoned leader, the ex-co-president of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş, declared: “We are the lock. We are the key”. Moreover on the 25<sup>th</sup> the HDP member of Parliament, Lezgin Botan, parodying Erdogan threatening the United States with an “Ottoman slap” had, on turn, threatened Mr. Erdogan with a “Kurdish slapin the elections – for which the HDP has launched, on the 30<sup>th</sup> a call for international observers.

Feeling its support beginning to wobble, the AKP authorities make use of all the means available to win time. Thus the Commission of enquiry, charged since 2017 with examining cases of civil servants sanctioned by “emergency decrees”. Run by a well known partisan of Erdogan, it serves mainly to delay cases going to the European Court of Human Rights, which can only intervene when all the national resources have been exhausted. Thus the Commission works as slowly as possible. Of 108,660 demands files, 9,700 were immediately rejected and, for the moment it is examining 12,000 and reintegrated to their former

jobs — a mere 310. Thus still 96,660 demands remain to be examined...

The figures for the repression are frightening: 245 journalists and workers in the Turkish media were in prison on 4<sup>th</sup> April, most of them in preventive detention pending their trial. This makes Turkey the biggest jailer of journalists in the world. For Academics a BBC report in Turkish counted, last July, 23.427 held since 16 July 2016. To prevent the HDP running its campaign the authorities have undertaken to arrest still more of its members... Arrests and sentencing make up an even more impressive list than in the preceding months.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, 15 students who had unfurled a banner denouncing the invasion and massacre of Afrin were arrested. Mr. Erdoğan described them as “terrorists” and “communists” and announced their exclusion from university (*Hürriyet*). On the same day, the police arrested at Halfeti (South of the country) in the house of Mehmet Öcalan, the brother of the imprisoned Kurdish leader, 9 people who had come to celebrate the latter’s birthday and some journalists. In Ankara, 3 people were arrested in their homes. Birthday cakes decorated with Kurdish colours were confiscated. The next day the Court of Appeal confirmed the sentence of 17 months jail for the HDP member of

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Parliament Osman Baydemir for “insulting a police officer” (in fact he had criticised a policeman for influencing the electors during the referendum). The same evening the Istanbul police arrested 25 HDP members during a raid on its Avcılar office. Those arrested include the co-presidents of the district Mahmur Çakan and Şebnem Değerli. On the 9<sup>th</sup> the Erzurum Criminal court increased the sentence on the HDP member of Parliament for Mus, Burcu Çelik Özkan, from 6 years to 7 years 3 months and 10 days. The charges were pro-PKK “propaganda” and “public incitement to hate” because she had attended the funeral of a PKK fighter. The Public Prosecutor had asked for a... 27 year sentence. On the 10<sup>th</sup>, the Ankara Prosecutor General launched enquiries on 8 HDP members of Parliament for “terrorist propaganda” and demanded the lifting of their Parliamentary immunity.

From 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> the 3<sup>rd</sup> session of one of Selahattin Demirtaş’s trials took place. As with the previous sessions, no foreign observers was authorised to attend. The Kurdish leader recalled in his defence how the Gulenists had tried to sabotage the peace negotiations between the Government and the PKK and collected against the HDP Kurds involved in the discussions “evidence” that is now being used against him... The Court decided to adjourn the case until 18 July and to keep him in detention until then. On the 13<sup>th</sup> Figen Yüksekdağ, the other former HDP co-President, was sentenced in Van to six months jail for having “breached electoral interdictions” — a grounds for condemning that is unique and original and refers back to a speech made on 27 October 2015... On the 19<sup>th</sup>, Figen Yüksekdağ, HDP member of Parliament for Mardin, incarcerated at the end of 2016 at the same time as Selahattin Demirtaş, was

sentenced to 7 years and 6 months prison for “membership in a terrorist organisation”. She had taken part in marches protesting against the curfews imposed for months at a time on Kurdish villages in 2016 and had attended the funerals of PKK fighters. On the same day 2 new HDP members of Parliament, Osman Baydemir (Urfa) and Selma Irmak (Hakkari) were stripped of their mandate (AFP) following their condemnations. On the 28<sup>th</sup> the Istanbul police carried out a raid at Güngören against a public meeting to prepare for HDP’s May Day activities. They incarcerated 41 members of the party and journalists present, including the Istanbul HDP co-president Cengiz Çiçek. After interrogation 31 people were released, the others being kept in detention (*Mezopotamya*). Another raid and more incarcerations took place in Denizli province.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> the 5<sup>th</sup> hearing of another trial of Selahattin Demirtaş took place in the Silivri prison camp. Here he and Sirri Süreya Önder, the HDP member of Parliament for Ankara, were tried for “terrorist propaganda” for speeches made during the Newroz celebrations of 2013. While Önder was present, Demirtaş submitted a medical report saying that his state of health prevented him from attending the hearing. This time observers were admitted to the court room but when the judge called on the police to expel the defence lawyers, except for one, the all the lawyers left the room in protest. Önder announced during the hearing that the HDP would make Demirtaş their candidate for the 4<sup>th</sup> May Presidential elections. The trial was then adjourned till 8<sup>th</sup> June, Demirtaş due to appear this time by video.

The repression of journalists has toughened still further. On the 2<sup>nd</sup>

an Interpol warrant (“red bulletin”) was issued for the former Chief editor of *Cumhuriyet*, Can Dündar, exiled in Germany — still for revealing the delivery of arms by the MIT (Turkish secret services) to the Syrian Jihadists in 2014. The Committee for the protection of Journalists (CPJ) called on Interpol to reject Turkey’s demands. Dündar faces 20 years imprisonment for espionage... On the 3<sup>rd</sup> the journalist Hasan Cemal was sentenced to a suspended sentence of 3 months and 22 days for articles written in 2013 that documented the withdrawal of the PKK from Turkey following the peace agreement. The Prosecution has also requested 15 years imprisonment against Çağdaş Kaplan for an article on the discriminations against Kurds at University (*Stockholm center for freedom*). On the 11<sup>th</sup> 4 journalists of the pro-Kurdish *Özgürlükçü Demokrasi* (Mehmet Ali Çelebi, Reyhan Hacıoğlu, Hicran Ürün and Pınar Tarlak), controlled for months by a pro-AKP “trustee” were arrested for presumed membership in a terrorist organisation. On the same day 3 journalists of the pro-Kurdish *Demokratik Ulus* (its chief editor Nuray Candan, its editor Kemal Sancılı and former editor Ziya Çiçekçi) each received 2 years jail for “terrorist propaganda”. These sentences were thereafter increased to 3 years and 9 months. The Court chose to ignore the annulment of sentences already made by a (higher) Court of Appeals... The lawyer and Human Rights activist Ms Eren Keskin, targeted by 143 different lawsuits for a total of 12 years prison and fines totalling 355.920 Turkish liras, saw her sentence of 6 months for having “openly insulted the institutions of the Turkish Republic” confirmed on appeal and then amended to a fine of 3,000 liras. She had accepted to be Chief Editor of the pro-Kurdish daily *Özgür Gündem*, closed since then by an Emergency decree. In

Diyarbakir, the Prosecutor has requested a sentence of 3 years imprisonment against the journalist Nurcan Baysal for “inciting hatred and enmity” following two articles criticising the invasion of Afrin... On the 20<sup>th</sup>, 4 Istanbul journalists: Semiha Sahin, Pinar Gayip, Ferhat Pehlivan and Gulsen Imre, of the Socialist Party of the oppressed (ESP) founded in 2010 by, amongst others, Figen Yüksekdağ, were formally arrested after a week’s detention and charged with “membership in a terrorist organisation” — in fact for their posts on the social media of 2014 to 2017 (*Cumhuriyet*).

Finally on the 30<sup>th</sup> the 4<sup>th</sup> hearing took place in the penitential complex of Silivri (Istanbul), of the trial for “gülenism” of 20 journalist of *Feza Gazetecilik* (the owning company of which is also owner of the daily *Zaman*) and of the press agency *Cihan Media*. The executives of *Cihan*: Hakan Taşdelen and Ahmet Metin Sekizkardeş and its General Manager Faruk Akkan were sentenced to 9 years prison, 3 other journalists received 7 years and 6 months, 3 others 4 years and 1 other 3 years, 1 month and 15 days. Most of them were charged with “membership in a terrorist organisation”. Another 3 were acquitted. In the proceedings against the staff of the daily *Zaman*, aimed at 31 people charged, 17 of whom have been incarcerated since August 2016, the Prosecutor called for life imprisonment for 9 journalists accused of having “violated the Constitution”. The only “proofs” against them are the articles by some of them, some of which go back to 2013, incriminating relatives, associates and even President Erdoğan himself on facts of corruption. The trial will begin on 10<sup>th</sup> May at Çağlayan (*Stockholm center for freedom*).

The list of sentences of the month continues with many academics

and other representatives of civil society. In the 4<sup>th</sup> Dr. Veli Polat (Istanbul University) and Professor Zübeyde Füsün Üstel (Galatasaray University) received 1 year and 3 months imprisonment for having signed in January 2016, together with 1,128 other Turkish and foreign University staff, the petition “We will not be part of this crime”. Dr. Polat received a suspended sentence but not Professor Üstel who “had not expressed remorse” (*Stockholm center for freedom*). On 9<sup>th</sup> April 3 other academics Erhan Keleşoğlu, İrfan Emre Kovankaya and Sharo İbrahim Garip, the first 2 fired by their University, still received the same sentences for the same reason “propaganda for a terrorist organisation”. On the 17<sup>th</sup> began the trial of the American preacher, Andrew Brunson, accused of having links with the Gülen network and the PKK (strange charges for a protestant pastor...) and espionage! In tears Brunson denied the accusations. Arrested in October 2016 after living more than 20 years in Turkey, where, together with his wife, he runs a Protestant church, he faces up to 35 years of prison. The next hearing was set for 7<sup>th</sup> May. On the same day the well-known singer Suavi Saygan was sentenced to 11 months and 20 days prison for having “insulted Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a speech at Izmir late in October 2016. His sentence was converted into a fine of 14.000 lire (3.500 dollars).

On 20<sup>th</sup> April, 3 other academics received suspended sentences for “terrorist propaganda” for statements they had made several years earlier. The political analyst Koray Caliskan (Boğazici University), Ayşe Hür and the Left theologian Eliaçık received 18 months 22 day, 15 months and 6 years 3 months respectively. Hür had described the PKK in a tweet not as a terrorist organisation but rather as “a guerrilla movement

(...) that have recourse to terrorist actions”. Eliaçık had spoken at a 2014 meeting of Islamic intellectuals supporting the peace process with the PKK that was then taking place.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> the school teacher Ayşe Celik, mother of an 8 month-old baby, arrived at the prison accompanied by HDP and CHP members of Parliament. She had been sentenced in April 2017 to 15 months for “propaganda for a terrorist organisation” after having, in January 2016, telephoned a television broadcast live to denounce the number of deaths resulting from the military operations in Kurdish cities. The situation where hundreds of mothers are being incarcerated with their infant children in disgraceful conditions has already been condemned by the Human Rights Commission of UNO.

The AKP authorities have also continued their repression of Kurdish culture. Some street signs in the Kurdish language have been withdrawn in Diyarbakir (*Mezopotamya*), several cultural organisations closed, and material heritage destroyed. At Kilis, the name of the “Mosque of the Kurds” (17<sup>th</sup> century) has been changed to the “Mosque of the Turks”. On the 30<sup>th</sup>, pro-AKP municipal “trustees” ordered the destruction with bulldozers of a statue commemorating 16 citizens shot by the security forces in 1992: they had protested against the dozens of murders perpetrated by the same security forces at Cizre. On the 18<sup>th</sup> the Governor of Ankara refused to allow the Kurdish slogans for the traditional 1<sup>st</sup> May rallies, claiming they were “incomprehensible” (*Rûdaw*). On the 24<sup>th</sup> the Speaker of the Turkish Parliament, İsmail Kahraman (AKP), got in a fury live on television at the leader of the HDP group, Metal Danış Beştaş, when she used the expression “Kurdish



provinces” while complaining of the government’s repression taking place. Kahraman denounced a “violation of the Constitution”, threatening to exclude Beştaş from the session, before finally calming down. The HDP member of Parliament, Osman Baydemir, had, indeed, been expelled from two Parliamentary sessions the month before, and fined 12,000 lire for having used the expression “Kurdistan”.

This month, Turkish military operations begun in Iraqi Kurdistan in March were considerably extended, with many air strikes: on the evening of 1<sup>st</sup> near Sidakan (Erbil province) and Qandil, then again on Sidakan on the 4<sup>th</sup>, and the next day on the villages round Khalifan et Lelkan, forcing 120 families to leave and wounding 2 civilians. On the 6<sup>th</sup> three raids were aimed at Amedî (NRT); on the 7<sup>th</sup> the Bradost region was again hit. On the 11<sup>th</sup> the Mount Kitkin Mighara and Mount Khwakurk. On the 14<sup>th</sup> three brothers were found dead near Amedi, hit as they were visiting their orchard in their village, close to the border. On the 12<sup>th</sup> the families of 4 other Kurds killed in similar circumstances the month before, announced they would assign Turkey before the International Court of Justice

(NRT). Other strikes aimed at Qandil on the 25<sup>th</sup> damaged orchards (NRT) and in 27<sup>th</sup> some violent clashes took place in Sidakan.

The Turkish has announced several times having “neutralised” PKK fighters: 14 in Kurdistan according to an announcement of 6<sup>th</sup> April, then 108 announced on 7<sup>th</sup> April (*Le Figaro*), 3 on the 8<sup>th</sup> near Şırnak, 7 on the 10<sup>th</sup> during the 2 days before in Iraq and Turkey, 4 on the 19<sup>th</sup> in Diyarbakir Province and, on the 28<sup>th</sup> 41, 13 of whom were on the Turkish side of the border (provinces of Tunceli, Siirt, Diyarbakir et Şırnak) and 28 on the Iraqi side during the previous week (*Bas News*)... The PKK also made announcement of the same kind, claiming on the 16<sup>th</sup> on the Turkish side of the border 3 soldiers killed and 1 wounded (*Rûdaw*), on the 17<sup>th</sup> 5 killed and on the 20<sup>th</sup> 11 killed on the Iraqi side of the border. Also on the Iraqi side 5 more were claimed on the 26<sup>th</sup>, and the same day 1 killed and 4 other wounded on the Turkish side near Lice. On the 30<sup>th</sup> the HPG (the armed branch of the PKK) announced 3 new attacks against the Turkish Army in Kurdistan (NRT).

Hard to verify, these crossed claims however bear witness to a

considerable intensification of the fighting, especially in Iraqi Kurdistan. Different reports show that the Turkish Army has violated Iraqi territory to a depth of about 20 km — it was reported on the 20<sup>th</sup> in the Barzan area and has installed on the top of several peaks 8 permanent bases connected by roads, especially close to Kanî Reş and Khwakurk (*Rûdaw*) and on the Turkish side on Mount Balkaya (Şemdinli) to watch the border... The only person who has not seen the Turkish troops is Mr. Abadi: on 10<sup>th</sup> April he denied any Turkish incursion, repeating that the old Iraqi-Turk agreement that authorised a Turkish deployment in border zones was no longer valid...

Similarly, on the Turkish side, some new curfews indicate fresh operations: on the 24<sup>th</sup>, access to 30 zones of the towns of Çukurca, Şemdinli and Yüksekova (Hakkari) was forbidden until 8<sup>th</sup> May. On the 25<sup>th</sup> a round-the-clock curfew of undefined duration was announced on 17 villages and 53 hamlets of the Lice and Kulp districts (Diyarbakir) after the death of a soldier (*Stockholm center for freedom*). On the 30<sup>th</sup> a two-week curfew was imposed on 26 villages and village guards (NRT).

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## IRAQI KURDISTAN: TOWARDS AN END TO THE FINANCIAL CRISIS?

**A**fter last month’s adoption of a federal budget considered unfair by the Iraqi Kurds, the conflict with the central government was in part transferred to the legal field, with a complaint by the President of Iraq against the Speaker of the Baghdad Parliament for constitutional breaches in the draft budget. This month was also marked by the continuation in Kurdistan of

the social disturbances due to the population’s economic difficulties and the hope of their gradual resolution with the adoption by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of new ways of calculating the salaries of its civil servants. The election campaign has also begun, in which the divided Kurdish parties are taking part. Finally the military situation was marked by both the resurgence of ISIS and by large scale intrusions by Turkey.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> April the Kurdish farmers lodged a formal complaint at the Administrative Court to obtain at last payment for their sales of wheat to Baghdad for 4 years running. The hearing was set for 1<sup>st</sup> July — too late in the opinion of the plaintiffs. During his visit to Sulaimaniyeh, the Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi rejected the responsibility for the affair onto the KRG. On the 4<sup>th</sup> Fuad Massoum, the (Kurdish) President of Iraq in turn started proceedings

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with the Federal Supreme Court against the Speaker of the Parliament for the legal and Constitutional violations of the Federal budget 2018: 14 violations including those linked to the KRG's allocation that does not, according to the President, meet the Constitutional criteria of equitability, plus others concerning encroachments on financial authority of the KRG and the Kurdish parliament.

On the 9<sup>th</sup>, following a complaint against the KRG by the Iraqi Oil Minister, Jabar al-Louaibi, the Supreme Court set the date of 6 May for the hearing on the legality of the exportation of oil started in 2014 by the Kurdistan Region after Baghdad had ceased to pay its share of the budget.

On the social level, April began as the strike of the civil servants, particularly in Sulaimaniyeh province, already lasted for several weeks, especially in the education and health sectors — the teaching term having been virtually blank for pupils and students.

On March 28<sup>th</sup> the KRG adopted a new system of calculating salaries of its civil servants, partly cancelling the austerity measures imposed over the last 2 years. The part of the salary held back would be limited to 30% for high salaries and 10% for the others and especially any salary less than 336 US\$ would be paid in full. The new system will not apply to staff whose salaries were reduced by 75%. On the 1<sup>st</sup> the KRG's Minister of Finance, Rêbaz Hamlan, announced that his Ministry was ready to pay the civil servants with the "new system" as soon as the lists from the Ministries concerned reached him. On the same day the Governor of Sulaimaniyeh confirmed the coming into force of the new system during a meeting with representatives of demonstrators, adding

that the recent decision of the Iraqi government to pay pensions to victims of the *Anfal* enabled the KRG to save billions of dinars and make easier the dropping of the very controversial "salary saving system".

These announcements did not immediately lead to the end of the demonstrations. These continued — on the 2<sup>nd</sup> thousands of people, including teachers, gathered and even put up tents in front of the Sulaimaniyeh Court (*NRT*). The next day, however, the Sulaimaniyeh branch of the Health Union accepted temporarily to end the strike if the KRG committed itself to paying the monthly wages every month and in full. On the 4<sup>th</sup> the teachers welcomed the KRG's recent announcements while still maintaining their principal demand — the immediate end to reductions in salary — and called for a great demonstration for the next day. They added that they would stop their movement if the KRG committed itself to paying salaries monthly and in full and proposed a mechanism to gradually reimbursing them all the parts of their salaries withheld since 2016.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> the civil servants of Health and Education ministries received their salaries calculated by the new system. On the 8<sup>th</sup> classes had been resumed in most schools in Sulaimaniyeh and Halabja provinces, although demonstrations continued at Garmiyah. On the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>, the KRG paid the Kurdish teachers of Kirkuk. On the 15<sup>th</sup>, however, the guards protecting Judges, ministers and high ranking officials, not included in the new system of calculation, organised a demonstration in front of the court to which they blocked access. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the Ministry of the Interior's bodyguards went on strike for the return of their salaries to their pre-austerity level.

The different Kurdish parties began their preparations for the election campaign, in view of the 12<sup>th</sup> May vote. The KDP remains confident of coming top in the Kurdish Region even if it maintains its decision to boycott the electoral consultation in Kirkuk, which it considers "occupied". While the movement for Change (*Goran*), the Islamic Group of Kurdistan (*Komal*) and the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) of the former KRG Prime Minister, Barham Salih, have formed an alliance called "Country" (*Nishtiman*), very present in the disputed territories, the PUK and the Islamic Union of Kurdistan (IUK) have been waging separate campaigns. The Islamic Movement of Kurdistan (*Bizutînewe*) has also decided to boycott the election. Barham Salih has replaced at the head of the "Country" list the outgoing former Speaker of the Kurdish Parliament Yousif Mohammed (*Goran*). On the 6<sup>th</sup> April, 5,800 ballots counting machines, powered by their own batteries, arrived. They should enable the speeding up of vote counting and prevent electoral fraud.

In a "post ISIS" situation not yet returned to normal, the issue of the vote of so many displaced persons remains sensitive, especially for the Kurds having had to leave Kirkuk in October. Most of these had to find accommodation in the Kurdistan Region. Since the Iraqi Electoral Commission has not planned to open polling stations outside the Province, they were at risk of being deprived of their electoral rights... On the 21<sup>st</sup>, according to *Rûdaw*, the Commission announced to dispel these worries that polling stations, devoted to displaced persons from Kirkuk, Nineveh (Mosul) and Anbar, would indeed be set up in Kurdistan, and that the displaced persons' electoral cards would be sent to them through the KRG

civil servants. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the head of the Commission in Sulaimaniyeh announced that 33 polling stations, devoted solely to displaced persons, would be opened in the province.

In Kurdistan the campaign for the federal Parliament, officially opened on the 15<sup>th</sup> (one day after the rest of Iraq because of the commemoration of the Anfal) rapidly gave rise to tensions. New Generation accused the PUK of seeking to prevent its candidates from campaigning in Sulaimaniyeh (*NRT*), and on the 28<sup>th</sup> the leader of New Generation in Dohuk, Kamiran Berwarî, declared he had been attacked in the Zakho bazar with 20 of his supporters.

In the disputed territories the Iraqi authorities had forbidden the hoisting or flying the Kurdish flag, but the PUK ignored the interdiction in Kirkuk for the rally with which it launched its campaign on the 17<sup>th</sup>, to which the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, Qubad Talabani, attended. The rally was also attended by the leader of the Party's anti-terrorist force Lahur Talabani. The Kurds fear non-equitable elections in this region controlled by the Iraqi Army and the Shi'ite militia. In the region of Shingal (Sinjar), the official responsible for the KDP list accused the local authorities of wanting to prevent the campaign by arresting those sticking up posters or by preventing his candidates from speaking publicly (*Rûdaw*).

In Kirkuk the correspondent of the daily paper *Ashark al-Awsat*, visiting the town on the 30<sup>th</sup>, described a campaign organised along sectarian lines, taking place in the middle of a heavy-handed presence of security forces, with the posters of the candidates being visible only in the areas of their own community. He testified that "in the Kurdish areas, the Kurdish

candidates were prevented from raising the Kurdish flag. The flag was even banned from the electoral posters, and the (Kurdistan) Region was not even mentioned in campaigning speeches. Candidates are not allowed to refer, even implicitly, to the "Kurdish identity of Kirkuk".

In a very rare development the Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi decided to carry out his campaign in Kurdistan – the first non-Kurdish Iraqi politician to try this experiment. He first arrived in Sulaimaniyeh on the 25<sup>th</sup> and was welcomed the next day at Erbil airport by the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, before whom he glorified "the Arabo-Kurdish brotherhood" but also declared: "Today we are under the tent of Iraq and whosoever wants separation will be torn apart by hyenas"... Abadi attempted to present himself as the victor over ISIS as well as over the separatist cravings of Kurdistan, but this was not met with much success. As for ISIS, the cancelation of the meeting in Dohuk, the third big Kurdish city, provoked the anger of members of his list there, and was afterwards attributed to the poor attendance at his previous meetings at Sulaimaniyeh and Erbil, to which the Kurdish media had been refused entry. The KDP declared that presence of Abadi's Coalition *Nasr* (Victory) in Kurdistan that above all to try to divide Kurdish votes.

Besides, the occupation of Afrin by the Turkish Army gave ISIS the opportunity to reorganize and increase the number of its attacks in the disputed territories, where the security has considerably diminished since the departure of the Peshmergas. On the 6<sup>th</sup> arms caches containing ammunition, explosives, rocket launchers and 81 mm mortars were found in Diyala province. On the 7<sup>th</sup> the Jihadists killed 3 civilians and

wounded 2 others by installing a phoney police check point North of Kirkuk. Some clashes with Iraqi forces took place on the 9<sup>th</sup> South of the town. On the evening of the 11<sup>th</sup> some ISIS were able to retake 2 villages in Kirkuk province and also some attacks in Mosul, Hawija and Tell Afar. On the 15<sup>th</sup> in the Khadhra quarter of Kirkuk a car bomb attack, aimed at a convoy of the Turkmen Front candidate, near a police check point, killed 1 person and injured 11 others (*Rûdaw*). This attack was claimed by ISIS on the 24<sup>th</sup>. In this catastrophic security situation, the Coalition tried to get the Iraqi government to authorise the redeployment of the Peshmergas at least to the outskirts of the more vulnerable towns. Discussions on this proposal between the Iraqi troops and the Kurds to this effect have led nowhere so far.

Amongst the other news regarding the disputed territories, the Iraqi Minister of Migrations and Displaced people decided on the 3<sup>rd</sup> to have 250 houses belonging to Kurdish families of Tuz Khurmatu repaired. These houses had been destroyed or badly damaged by the Iraqi forces and the *Hashd al-Shaabi* militia after their taking of the town last autumn. Several thousands of the inhabitants are still displaced so that, if the Kurdish schools have been able to reopen recently, the number of classes has been greatly reduced (*Rûdaw*). However the rehabilitation of their houses will probably not be enough to persuade the inhabitants to return: on the 16<sup>th</sup> a Kurd was seriously wounded by two Shi'ite Turkmen riding a motorbike. At Makhmour, South of Erbil, the town's Kurdish mayor pointed out on the 7<sup>th</sup> that the KRG civil servants who had left the town for Erbil on the arrival of the Iraqi troops should be able to return to take up their administrative responsibilities after five months absence.

One last point, the presence of Turkish troops in the Kurdistan Region has become yet heavier this month, to the point of pushing

the Iraqi President Fuad Massoum to call Turkey in an interview with the daily paper *Al-Hayat* to withdraw its troops from Iraq: since

the major operations against ISIS were finished, he said, "the foreign troops have no excuse for remaining on Iraqi soil".

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## IRAN: THE KURDISH BAZAARS ON STRIKE AGAINST THE CLOSING OF THE BORDERS

**T**he catastrophic economic situation of Iranian Kurdistan finds an echo in the tragic recent murders of the Kurdish porters (*kolbars*) by the regime's police. This month, after the great demonstrations at the beginning of the year, the closing of the border extended to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region has provoked major strikes in most of the Kurdish towns.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> Marivan's shop keepers started a strike to ask for the reopening of the border at Baneh, Marivan, Piranhasar and Sardasht, closed since December 2017. These months of closure have caused a considerable increase of unemployment. According to a representative of the town of Marivan, 8,000 people are unemployed in his town. It is estimated that 75,000 to 80,000 the number of *kolbars* on this section of the border were made unemployed by the closing of the borders. The authorities have promised the reopening but have done nothing about it. On the 5<sup>th</sup> 4 Kurdish *kolbars* were arrested by the border guards and taken to an unknown locality (*Bas News*). On the evening of the 7<sup>th</sup> *pasdarans* opened fire on 2 youths from Iraqi Kurdistan, killing one and wounding (and arresting) the other. In the evening of the 8<sup>th</sup> it was Iranian border guards who fired on inhabitants of Kalar, in the region of Shawal, in Iraqi Kurdistan, who had come to hunt near the border, killing a teacher of 24 and wounding at

least 2 members of the group (*Kurdistan-24*).

On the 11<sup>th</sup> to protest against the closing by the Iran regime of the border round Siranband-Baneh between Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran, some dozens of Kurdish businessmen and shop keepers started a strike in Marivan and Saqqez cities. On the morning of the 15<sup>th</sup> the bazaar merchants of Baneh and Javanrud called in their turn for a strike. Meanwhile a Kurdish shopkeeper died of his wounds on the 14<sup>th</sup>, a few days after being victim of an accident while he was being chased by government soldiers. On the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> the shopkeepers' strikes of the border towns in Kurdistan, Kermanshah and Western Azarbaijan spread still further, the shopkeepers of Sardasht, Mahabad, Boukan and Piranshahr, having joined the strikers. In Baneh, the strikers refused to listen to the promises of Said Jalili, the representative of Khamenei who had come to hear their demands, booed him and went on with their movement.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> the strike entered its 6<sup>th</sup> day, the police intensified its attempts to intimidate those working for shops on strike, briefly detaining dozens of people, ordering them to sign promises to stop the strike before releasing them, and threatening other managers into opening their shops or be arrested. The Kurdish opponents of the regime accuse it of wanting to force the Kurdish shopkeepers

to trade with other Iranian provinces, while the regime rejects the responsibility of the closure on a security demand by the Iraqi government. The KDPI announced its support for the strike and denounced the policies of deliberate economic non- or under-development of Iranian Kurdistan. In its annual report, the Kurdish organisation for the surveillance of Human Rights, *Hengaw*, reports that only in the course of the first half of last year 150 *kolbars* were killed by the Iranian forces.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> some shopkeepers in Iranian Kurdistan have returned to work saying they wanted to give the Iranian authorities several weeks to carry out the promises in response to the complaints. Some inhabitants reported that the shops had been reopened at Javanrud, Mahabad, Saqqez, Sardasht and Sarpol Zahab, and on the 23<sup>rd</sup> in Marivan and Piranshahr. On the other hand the strike continued on the 23<sup>rd</sup> in Baneh for the 9<sup>th</sup> day, after the bazaar merchants had rejected appeals by the government to return to work. Baneh's economy is more dependent on *kolbars* than the other zones. On the same day a *kolbar* was shot by *pasdarans* near Oshnavieh (Shino). As the strike was continuing on the 24<sup>th</sup>, the Iranian government arrested and imprisoned 19 demonstrators (NRT). In a symbolic gesture of protest, the demonstrators organised some empty meals to show the situation of Kurdish families unable to feed themselves... (WKI)

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According to the website *Secours Rouge (Red Assistance)*, there were clashes in Marivan during the night of the 24<sup>th</sup> between the inhabitants and the *pasdarans* after a *pasdar* colonel Kaveh Kohneh-Poushi killed an inhabitant with another *pasdar*. The inhabitants burnt the houses of the two criminals.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> while the strike was continuing for the 10<sup>th</sup> day in Ciwanro, Baneh, Marivan, Bokan, Mahabad, Saqqez, Sardasht and Piranshar, and demonstrators took to the streets in Marivan, the *pasdarans* fired in the air to disperse them (*Rojinfo*). On the 26<sup>th</sup> about a thousand inhabitants of Baneh demonstrated peacefully in front of a local government building demanding the governor's withdrawal. They accused him of not conveying their demands for the reopening of the borders to the government. The strike continued on the 28<sup>th</sup> at Baneh, according to the NRT site.

Besides, the Iranian authorities arrested many people who had taken part in the anti-regime demonstrations at the beginning of the year, or who had shown their support of the Iraqi Kurdistan independence referendum. Thus the Kurdish activist Ronak Aghaii, arrested by the Intelligence Services in September 2017 and taken to Urmia for having "hoisted the

flag of Kurdistan" during the Mahabad rallies in support of the Iraqi referendum, was taken to Mahabad Prison on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2018 to serve her sentence.

Regarding the consequences of the anti-regime demonstrations the authorities decided at the end of January that they would try 300 demonstrators. The Press Agency of Human Rights Activists (HARANA) reported that 3,700 people had been arrested by the Iranian regime in 80 towns. Other demonstrations that lasted a week occurred in the city (in majority Arab) of Ahwaz, before the regime's security forces finally managed to quell them.

Shameful and unfair treatments to people continue to be regularly reported. Thus on 2<sup>nd</sup> a source reported the situation of a Kurdish political prisoner, 28 years of age, originally from Oshnavieh (Shino), Amir Peighami. Although his leg had swollen to 3 times its normal size the prison authorities refused a medical treatment outside the prison so that he is in danger of losing the leg. Another case of unjust condemning is that of a Kurdish militant, Ramin Hossein Panahi for his presumed membership of the Kurdish nationalist group *Komala*. It aroused the indignation of 3 Human Rights experts of UNO, who appealed on the

19<sup>th</sup> Iran to cancel the death sentence to which he had been sentenced on the basis of false accusations, a sentence confirmed by the Iranian Supreme Court at the beginning of April. Arrested in June 2017 at Sanandaj after having been wounded in an ambush set up by the *pasdarans*, Panahi, who was tortured in prison and who was refused access to a doctor, went on hunger strike at the beginning of the year. According to his lawyer, Hossein Ahmadianiaz, "The preliminary court decided he was a fighter and gave him the death sentence even though he proved in court that he was unarmed and had not fired at anyone".

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> the Human Rights defence Office postponed the hanging of 5 men of Kurdish origins sentenced for murder (NRT).

Finally, on the 27<sup>th</sup> while preparations for the 1<sup>st</sup> May were underway, the security summoned to intimidate them at least 13 Trade Union activists from Khuzestan and Kurdistan provinces. At Sanandaj the activists for the rights of labour Sharif Saedpanah, Habibollah Karimi, Ghaleb Hosseini, Khaled Hosseini and Mozaffar Salehnia were summoned to appear before the revolutionary Court. They were to be tried on the 28<sup>th</sup> for "having organised and taken part in protest gatherings".