

Erdoğan and the sins of Turkey

written by Noa Lazimi | 09.06.2024

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seizes every opportunity to criticize the IDF's moral fighting in Gaza, echoing the false Palestinian "resistance" narrative and depicting murderous Hamas operatives as "freedom fighters."

It's time for Israel to respond in kind.

Since the Swords of Iron War began, Erdoğan has insisted on portraying Hamas as a liberation movement and presenting himself as the flag bearer of the Palestinian struggle. Recently, he proudly announced that over 1,000 Hamas operatives were being treated in hospitals across Turkey and lamented that the Greeks view Hamas as a terrorist organization rather than a resistance movement.

Erdoğan's blatant alignment with Hamas is in line with other hostile actions by Ankara against Israel in recent years, especially since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, including the unprecedented decision to sever trade relations with Israel.

However, this also provides Israel with an opportunity it has not yet utilized: to shift from the defensive posture that has characterized its public diplomacy for years and to actively counter the hypocrisy entrenched in the false Palestinian narrative of occupation and dispossession that Erdoğan promotes on every possible platform.

In fact, there is no better example than Turkey to illustrate the depth of Erdoğan's hypocrisy regarding the "Israeli occupation." For decades, the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" has functioned as a de facto state despite lacking international recognition. In 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus in response to a Greek coup attempt against the legitimate Cypriot government, using the pretext of protecting the Turkish population on the island.

In violation of a U.N. ceasefire, Turkey then launched another operation, revealing its true aim: the partition of Cyprus. During this operation, Turkey forcibly expelled over 200,000 Greek Cypriots who were replaced by new settlers from Turkey, successfully establishing control over more than a third of Cyprus's territory.

Turkish aggression continues today with the presence of over 40,000 Turkish troops in the north of the island, illegal construction on Greek Cypriot-owned property, ethnic segregation and the destruction of Christian cultural heritage.

Similarly, while Erdoğan boasts of standing alongside the “oppressed” Palestinian people, he denies political and cultural rights to Turkey’s Kurdish minority.

After the failed coup attempt in July 2016 by a military faction loyal to Erdoğan’s hated rival Fethullah Gulen, Erdoğan embarked on a major purge that extended far beyond Gulen’s supporters. Leaders of the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), members of parliament and thousands of party members across Turkey, including senior officials of various municipalities, were arrested.

A year earlier, during clashes between Turkish security forces and Kurdish insurgents, Erdoğan’s harsh measures to suppress the violence in the southeastern part of the country reached unprecedented levels. Turkey imposed curfews in many Kurdish areas and suspended essential services for the residents, leading to a massive humanitarian crisis and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Kurdish citizens from their homes.

To be sure, Erdoğan gives “equal” treatment to Kurdish autonomies beyond the border. Since 2016, Turkey has launched a series of attacks against PKK bases in the Kurdish region of Iraq and its associated organizations in Syria. Under the guise of fighting terror, Turkey’s president carried out a de facto annexation, significantly violating the human rights of the area’s residents.

Since 2018, Turkey has transferred around 400,000 Arabs and Turkmen into the Kurdish enclave in Syrian Afrin, reducing the Kurdish population, which previously constituted 80% of the local population, to less than a quarter.

Even the war against ISIS did not alter Erdoğan’s priorities. When Turkey finally joined the coalition forces’ campaign against the murderous organization, it was used by Turkey as a cover story to land a severe blow to the Kurds in northern Iraq and Syria, investing far fewer resources in destroying ISIS strongholds.

And what can be more ironic than Erdoğan pretending to show concern for the welfare of Gazans in early October 2023, while at the same time striking about 140 civilian targets in northern Syria, including bombing hospitals?

Turkey also behaves as an occupying force in places where there is no direct threat to its security. To ensure the survival of the Libyan regime and reap economic as well as other benefits, in January 2020 Ankara sent drones and soldiers—including jihadist mercenaries from Syria—to support the Islamist “Government of National Accord” against the opposing forces led by Khalifa Haftar.

Turkey’s military entrenchment in Libya has worsened the human rights situation in Libya and its overall stability, and continues to raise concerns for Egypt, which fears the spillover of terrorism into its territory.

The next time Erdoğan waves terms like “occupation,” “resistance” and “freedom fighters,” Israel must not remain silent. It must remind the international community who the real occupier is.

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