

EUROPEAN ARMS & TURKEY'S ATTACK ON SYRIAN KURDS

An explainer

Background

On the 9th of October 2019, the Turkish army launched an invasion of Syria to occupy a strip of land 30 km-deep across the border.

The stated objective of the offensive was to uproot the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which de facto governs northeastern Syria after it expelled ISIS with the help of the US army.

The Syrian Democratic Forces' main unit is the YPG, composed of Syrian Kurds.

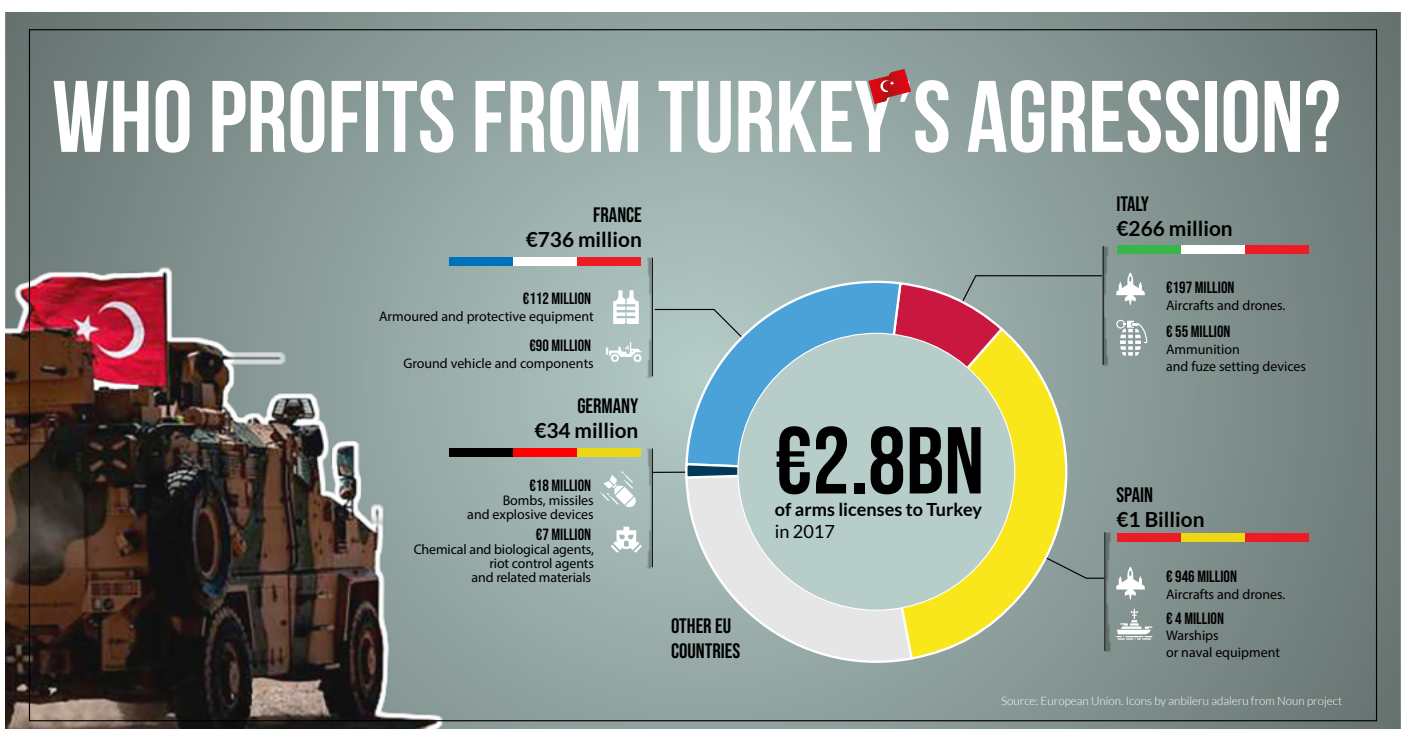
Turkey represses Kurdish people in its own territory and accuses the YPG of having links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, against whom it has waged a domestic conflict.

Turkey also claims that it is conquering Syrian territory to resettle some of the 3 million Syrian refugees it currently hosts. Both the forced return of refugees and the military invasion of sovereign Syrian territory violate international law.

[More than 300 000 Syrians](#) have been displaced and [over 400 were killed](#) since the start of Turkey's military assault.

The European Union has condemned Turkey's invasion and some countries such as France and Germany have agreed to a limited halt of arms exports to Turkey.

[EU governments' conclusions](#) fell short of declaring an arms embargo on Turkey binding on all member states.



What our MEPs says



Özlem Alev Demirel
(Die Linke, Germany)

“The Turkish President is waging a war that is illegal under international law but purely for domestic and political reasons. United States of America and Russia are also now using this war for their own purposes: Trump implementing his exit strategy whilst Putin gets the Syrian democratic forces to be closer to the Assad regime. Once again, it’s the Kurds who are caught in between and will be paying the price. Meanwhile, the EU reaffirms that economic trade relations are more important than human rights and democracy. Had it not, it would have meant a genuine arms embargo, as well as clear support and recognition of the administration of the democratic autonomous regions in Syria - both of which are now more urgent than ever.”

Arms to Turkey

European states issued licences for [€2.8bn of arms sales](#) to Turkey in 2017.

Turkey is a NATO member alongside many EU member states. This military alliance has been a factor in the EU’s arms export decisions. The EU considers Turkey a strategic military ally.

In fact, just as Turkey is invading Syria, its military [has been taking part](#) in UK-led NATO military exercises in Scotland alongside other EU militaries.

Another factor influencing EU arms exports to Turkey is the [EU-Turkey deal](#) signed in 2016 to stem the flow of refugees to Europe. The agreement included the payment of [€6 billion in ‘bribes’](#) to Turkey in exchange.

Amid criticisms of the offensive, Turkish President Erdogan [warned the EU](#) that he “will open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way.”

Fuelling human rights violations

Kurds in Turkey have long suffered discrimination in all walks of life.

The Kurdish language is not allowed [as a language of instruction](#) in schools. The Turkish government sees expressions of Kurdish culture and political organising as a national security threat.

Lately, Turkey has stepped up repression of Kurdish elected representatives. Authorities have arrested members of the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) and have denied to some the right to stand for elections.

This domestic repression of Kurds is spreading to Syria’s Kurds who, after gaining autonomy after the defeat of ISIS, have begun flourishing as a society. The [constitution of Rojava](#), as the autonomous areas in northeastern Syria are known, call for “freedom, justice, dignity and democracy and led by principles of equality and environmental sustainability.”

Amnesty International [has accused](#) the Turkish military and allied militia of “shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians, during the offensive into northeast Syria.”

These human rights violations are taking place in the context of wider repression in Turkey, for example against [journalists](#) and [freedom of assembly](#), and recent threats to [Cypriot sovereignty](#).

The view of the Left

The EU pays lip service to human rights in Turkey and the wider region but more often than not fails to apply it in practice. The EU is not a bystander in the conflict. It is an active player.

The EU has condemned the Turkish offensive in Syria but Turkey’s disregard for human rights and international law is not new and European countries have continued to supply Turkey with billions of euros in arms.

These arms are being used against civilians, specifically against the Kurds.

We want the EU to end arms exports to Turkey for as long as it continues to disregard international law and for EU member states to end the foreign intervention that has fuelled the region’s conflicts. We have consistently called for such a policy not only for Turkey but also for other countries in the region, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

We stand in solidarity with the Kurdish people and all peoples in the region struggling against repression and for dignity and human rights.