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Governing Kurds through spatial design: Turkey in Afrin

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ABSTRACT

On 20 January 2018, Turkey launched *Operation Olive Branch*, which was a cross-border military operation conducted in the Syrian Kurdish majority city of Afrin (also called Afrîn/Efrîn). Lasting two months after, which Turkey and its allies gained control of the city, the latter set out to the dissolution of the Kurdish self-administration structures. This article argues that Turkey's activities in Afrin exemplify the expansion of the country's long-standing Kurdish policies through spatial design beyond the state. For around a century, Turkey has tried to forge the nation along ethnonationalist lines using governing its population through space. Turkey's (post-)military engagement in Afrin shifts the spatiality of the country's Kurdish policies from the domestic (national) to the international level. Turkey undertakes a wide range of discursive and material practices that aim to exclude the Kurdish 'Other' through the reconstruction of space. There are two spatial strategies with which the extraterritorial spatiality of Turkey's Kurdish policies has operated as a transformative force in Afrin: *displacement and settlement*; and *discursive reconstruction*. These strategies have significant effects in and beyond Northern Syria.

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Introduction

In 2014, Afrin (also called Afrîn/Efrîn) was declared as one of the three cantons of the *Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria* (AANES) in the region known as Rojava. Run by the Kurdish *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) and its military wing *People's Protection Units* (YPG) forces, the Kurdish autonomous rule under the AANES was a state-building project based on 'democratic autonomy' as detailed in its constitution; namely, the *Rojava Social Contract* (Günaydin 2022). The AANES adopted 'democratic confederalism' as an alternative to territorialised and centralised ideas of statehood. It aimed for the creation of democratic autonomous institutions, drawing on local governance practices and structures and implementing an economic and developmental model prioritising self-sufficient units and communal principles, such as cooperatives (Cemgil 2021).

The region experienced relative stability under the AANES control compared to other areas in Syria, including those controlled by the Assad regime. This would change in February 2016 when tensions arose between the YPG forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The reason

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was YPG's territorial expansion in major Arab towns of the Aleppo Governorate, which Afrin is also part of. Following military successes in these areas, YPG set to the task of creating a corridor to link Afrin to other cantons in the eastern Euphrates. Russia's diplomatic efforts to persuade the YPG to withdraw from the region proved unsuccessful, which set in motion a chain of events leading to Turkey's launch of *Operation Olive Branch* on 20 January 2018 (Al-Hilu 2019).

Operation Olive Branch was a cross-border military operation conducted by the Turkish Armed Forces, together with the Syrian National Army (SNA), in the Kurdish majority city of Afrin. Turkey justified *Operation Olive Branch* as a counterinsurgency operation. The Turkish state referred to the rapid growth of YPG/PYD territorial control across the border as a major threat to its national security. Two months after the start of the operation, on 18 March 2018, the Turkish army and its Syrian allied forces gained control of the city and dismantled the Kurdish self-autonomous rule under the AANES.

Before, throughout and in the aftermath of *Operation Olive Branch*, Turkey repeatedly stated that its military actions aimed to eliminate terrorists and terrorist activities that were said to be also endangering Syrian territorial integrity. The civilian population in Afrin and its surroundings was not the target, Turkish officials reiterated (Dünya Gazetesi 2018; TRT News 2018). However, developments following *Operation Olive Branch* tell us a different story. There has been a gap between rhetoric and everyday practices in ways that are similar to Turkey's activities in other parts of Northern Syria (Yüksel and van Veen 2019). Turkish interventions in Afrin have gone well beyond a counterinsurgency action to involve a range of economic, social and political transformations (Al-Hilu 2019). The key elements of this strategy are, among others, the co-optation of local political elites and economic actors, infrastructural interventions and the establishment of a security sector trained and controlled by Turkey and/or its allied forces on the ground (Adar 2020; Al-Hilu 2019; Asseburg 2020). These have led analysts to describe Turkey's activities in Afrin and broader Northern Syria as a strategy of '(R)ebuilding empire at the margins' (Yüksel and van Veen 2019, 1).

This article argues that space, or rather the social production of space, is fundamental to Turkey's activities in Afrin. For around a century, Turkey has tried to forge the nation along ethnonationalist lines by means of governing the Kurdish population through spatial design (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011; Jongerden 2007; Öktem 2004). Space and spatial arrangements gained more importance in the 1990s with the shift of Turkey's counterinsurgency operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to the rural areas of the country's south-east (Güneş 2021; Jongerden 2007; Ünal 2012). *Operation Olive Branch* is reminiscent of Turkey's long-standing engagement with space in its dealings with the Kurds, regarded as a 'problematic' population. Having until recently been limited to the domestic arena, Turkey's Kurdish policies resting, on spatial design, are now expanded beyond the state. Turkey's (post-)military engagement in Afrin shifts the intertwined logics and practices of counterinsurgency and spatial design to the international level. Military action is entangled with a wider strategy of spatial reproduction intervening in the lives and lived experiences of the Kurdish people.

Wide ranges of studies in International Relations have applied spatial approaches to the study of the politics of international counterinsurgency. These studies have underlined the centrality of space in the global 'War on Terror' (see, for example, Amoore and de Goede 2008; Cowen and Gilbert 2008; Elden 2007). Gregory (2004) traces the genealogy of the post-9/11 'War on Terror' and argue for a spatial approach that is concerned

with not only geopolitics and geoeconomics but also performances of space. Utilising Edward Said's notion of 'imaginative geographies', Gregory shows how spatial constructions rooted in colonial narratives of 'Othering' and 'difference' were mobilised in such places as Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel/Palestine. Understanding space as socially produced throws into relief those performances that divide the world into us/them, turn distance into difference and justify violence and destruction to protect the familiar space from potential attacks emanating from the unfamiliar space. Spatial imaginations perform territory through boundary-making, render certain parts of the world into 'spaces of exception' and propel security apparatuses dividing people and fragmenting territory to serve the goals of occupation, settlement and economic and environmental exploitation (Gregory 2004).

A space-centred analysis of *Operation Olive Branch* adds to the existing scholarship on international counterinsurgency. Past works have almost exclusively looked at counterinsurgency wars carried out by Western countries in the non-Western world, whether in colonial/imperial times (Khalili 2012) or in the twentieth/twenty-first centuries (Amoore and de Goede 2008). This article focuses on a non-Western country (Turkey) and in doing so, it diversifies and pluralises actors of international counterinsurgency because both the intervening party and the intervened party are non-Western countries. This raises the question as to whether spatial constructions are similar or different from Western 'imaginative geographies' because the geographical 'distance' of the 'Other' underpinning Western colonialism is not present in the Turkey/Syria case. I ask: What performances of space, discursive and material, are at play in Turkey's counterinsurgency operations in Northern Syria?

Data for this research have been collected through triangulation. I have used a range of primary and secondary sources. The latter includes academic works (such as books, articles and dissertations) that have been published on the topic. Data also come from leading newspapers, reports by human rights advocacy groups and policy papers and analyses by various research centres and think-tanks. The second type of works has been particularly helpful because they reveal real-life testimonies and observations from the ground based on physical/online interviews with civilians, journalists, business people and humanitarian actors. I have crosschecked data by looking at sources in Turkish/from Turkey and international publications, especially Syrian (Kurdish) publications.

The empirical findings illustrate that Turkey undertakes two spatial strategies with which the extraterritorial spatiality of Kurdish policies has operated as a transformative force: *displacement and settlement*; and *discursive reconstruction*. These practices act upon the life and lived experiences of the local Kurdish population, carrying significant effects for social, economic and political dynamics in and beyond Afrin.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section provides a brief discussion of Turkey's relations with Syrian military forces. This enables to unpack the evolving cooperation and interaction between the Turkish state and SNA prior to, throughout and in the aftermath of *Operation Olive Branch*. This will be followed by a review of the literature on the spatial politics of Turkey's Kurdish policies. This review forms the article's conceptual framework and helps situate *Operation Olive Branch* within a larger history of Turkey's dealings with Kurds through space. I will then move to the empirical analysis focusing on the movement of Turkey's Kurdish policies through spatial design from the domestic (national) to the international (Afrin/Syria) level.

Turkey and its military allies in Syria

Operation Olive Branch was carried out by the Turkish army and Turkey-backed SNA factions, which are composed of around 25,000 Arab and Turkmen fighters. During the operation, Turkish military forces conducted intensive airstrikes and artillery shelling, whose volume was such that one-tenth of the country's entire aircraft arsenal is estimated to have been used in Afrin. The airstrikes and shelling cleared the way for SNA factions to reach the town of Afrin, which the Turkish military and SNA allies captured on 18 March 2018 (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020; McGee 2019).

The SNA has its roots in the FSA, which has served as an umbrella organisation bringing together a wide range of opposition forces against the Assad regime. Turkey has been a key supporter of anti-Assad military groups from the very start of the war in Syria and provided financial, logistical and political backing to Syrian opposition groups that have taken different organisational forms throughout the war. Already in 2012, Turkey created a command centre in Istanbul to manage relations with FSA leaders. Developments in the years to follow would result in the emergence of SNA as a collective backed up by Turkey. Turkey's evolving relations with Syrian military groups have primarily been due to the growth of the YPG under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as the official military wing of the AANES. As the YPG acquired new military gains across Northern Syria, Turkey launched its first cross-border operation in the region (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). Named *Operation Euphrates Shield* (August 2016–March 2017), the military action was led by the Turkish Armed Forces and supported by the FSA. The operation had two targets: the Islamic State forces and Kurdish military groups. The latter had already been controlling Manbij with a large Arab population and had the opportunity to capture Jarablus too, which would have enabled Kurdish forces to link the east and west of the Euphrates. *Operation Euphrates Shield* was executed in this particular context (Eralp 2020).

The SNA was formed out of anti-Assad factions that Turkey supported during *Operation Euphrates Shield* and became pivotal to Turkey's subsequent military actions in Northern Syria targeting YPG forces. This includes *Operation Olive Branch* and *Operation Peace Spring* (October 2019–November 2019). Being 'a collective of Turkish-backed, armed opposition groups' (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020, 10), the SNA has received its financial support and training from Turkey. In its social media presence, the SNA has used both the Syrian opposition flag and the Turkish flag, conducted its social media communication in Arabic and Turkish and used Turkish nationalist symbols, including Ottoman names for its factions (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). The SNA has been very open in admitting that it receives orders directly from Ankara, and its factions are deployed in military operations following a chain of command linking on-site actors with Turkish authorities on the ground and state institutions in Turkey (McGee 2019). The execution and aftermath of *Operation Olive Branch* reflect these relations and dynamics. The operation was planned, led and coordinated by Turkey and upon taking control of Afrin, Turkey-backed SNA factions became *de facto* power with direct control of Afrin's districts and villages while Turkey established military, security and intelligence presence across the city and its surroundings (Al-Hilu 2019; Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020).

Previous research on the political, economic and social transformation of post-operation Afrin (Al-Hilu 2019; McGee 2019) indicates that the relationship between Turkey and SNA factions is very difficult to disentangle. This is especially the case when determining who is

responsible for which action in Afrin. While direct collaborative action is evident in such cases as the dismantling of Kurdish self-administration structures in Afrin and their replacement with local allies (Günaydin 2022), this is not always the case for each development. Officially, the armed groups in charge of Afrin's security are from the SNA factions. However, these groups are working closely with Turkish authorities and often carry out raids with Turkish special forces against suspected locals, primarily the Kurds (Al-Hilu 2019; Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). Members of Afrin's civilian police were trained in the Turkish police academy and follow orders from the Turkish intelligence and special forces (Al-Hilu 2019; Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). In cases of violations, such as in matters of housing, land and property, while most perpetrators are SNA factions, Turkish officials were also actively involved (PÊL–Civil Waves Organization 2023) and/or were aware of SNA activities and did not act (McGee 2019). Most importantly, Turkey is an occupying power in Afrin and has responsibilities according to international law regarding the safety of civilians and their property. These responsibilities extend beyond Turkish military officials and concern the actions of local groups that Turkey supports and/or coordinates with – in this case, the SNA factions (Human Rights Watch 2022).

Similar difficulties arise in identifying the responsible subject for the two practices of spatial design that this article focuses on. In a few cases, such as the destruction of statues upon taking control of Afrin, there is clear evidence linking the deed to the actor as will be shown in the empirical section. In other cases, however, the subject is either not to be traced back to or a range of actors, Turkish officials and local groups, jointly participated in a specific aspect of spatial politics. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, especially the nature of Turkish-SNA relations and international legal obligations, Turkey bears the responsibility of Afrin's transformation from 2018 onwards. SNA actions, irrespective of motivations, partake in the extraterritorial operation of Turkey's Kurdish policies. This happens in the context of Turkey's long history of governing Kurds through space, which the article now turns to.

Politics of space and the Kurdish issue in Turkey

With the drawing of nation-state borders across the Middle East following the interlinked events of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and World War I, Kurds – a stateless nation to date – became and are still scattered across four countries: Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The outcome is that there has been a lack of congruence between the national (ethnic) and territorial aspects of statehood in these four countries (Jongerden 2007). Similar to its other neighbours with a sizeable Kurdish population, Turkey's state-building project – since the country's establishment in 1923 – has rested on the national-territorial organisation of space (Öktem 2004). This means that for over a century, the Turkish state's Kurdish policies have revolved around 'the molding of society and identity through the construction of space' to achieve an ethnically, religiously and linguistically homogenous nation-state (Jongerden 2009, 1). It is therefore not surprising that spatial analyses of the Kurdish issue in Turkey are abundant (see, for example, Aslan 2015; Bakan and van Bruinessen 2024; Bozçalı 2021; Gambetti and Jongerden 2011; Jongerden 2009; Öktem 2004). The central argument in this literature is the essential role of space in Turkey's Kurdish policies with a view to crafting and consolidating the national-territorial ideal.

While such spatial strategies as forced displacement, settlement and resettlement, material destruction, dispossession and linguistic erasure go back to the early days of the republic

(Gündoğan 2011; Öktem 2004), Turkey's long-term policy of governing Kurds through space intensified in the 1990s. In the aftermath of the Cold War, the PKK shifted the geography of its training and armed fights to the rural areas of Turkey's south-east, which is largely populated by Kurds (Güneş 2021). As a reaction, Turkey developed a new counterinsurgency doctrine. In 1991, the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces announced what is known as the 'field domination doctrine' in the fight against the PKK. Starting from 1993, the new doctrine was deployed in Kurdish-populated cities of the country with the core argument that the 'physical and social environment' of the region was 'a force-multiplier for the force' (Jongerden 2007, 78). Turkish Armed Forces designated Kurdish-majority rural areas as 'negative environments', which provided the PKK with the necessary coverage (due to topographical factors, such as high mountains) and subsistence (e.g. food and shelter) to conduct its operations. Based on this, the Turkish army followed a two-fold strategy aiming at 'changing the spatial ground of the war': contraction through the settlement of the population and penetration into PKK-dominated spaces (Jongerden 2007, 78). The goal was to further homogenise the rural space through the production and reproduction of life that would serve Turkish state interests in the context of its counterinsurgency strategy (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011). The designation of the rural setting as 'negative environment' believed to be enabling and reinforcing PKK activities (Jongerden 2007) resulting in large-scale village destructions and evictions and the forced migration of the Kurdish population to urban centres in the country's west. It also deepened existing practices of peripheral incorporation into the nation-state core through multifaceted institutional, administrative, infrastructural and security-related arrangements (Aslan 2015; Gündoğan 2011; Öktem 2004). These spatialisation strategies went hand in hand with the Turkish military's penetration into PKK-dominated spaces, leading to mixed results of field domination, which was the central aim of the new counterinsurgency doctrine (Jongerden 2007).

In this paper, I argue that with the 2018 *Operation Olive Branch* in Afrin, 'the spatiality of Turkish state's Kurdish policies' (Jongerden 2009, 2) has reached beyond the territorial limits of the nation-state. *Operation Olive Branch* is by no means the first cross-border operation carried out by the Turkish military in its fight against the PKK. The first conventional war between Turkey and the PKK was in Northern Iraq in 1991 (Jongerden 2007). Since then, Turkey has conducted numerous cross-border military operations in Iraq and Syria by relying on the right to 'self-defence' as articulated in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter. The spatial dimension of Turkish counterinsurgency operations beyond its borders, including in Syria, is also reflected in Turkey's proposal to create a 'safe zone' along the Syria-Turkey border as a means to prevent Kurdish self-autonomous rule (Adar 2020; Eralp 2020). The 'safe-zone' concept has also been studied in the framework of the Turkish state's policy of 'return migration' of Syrian refugees (Mencütek 2022). These works make important contributions to understanding the extraterritorial dimension of Turkey's counterinsurgency and migration policies by recognising the importance of space. Nevertheless, academic research has yet to offer *spatial analyses* of the Turkish state's Kurdish policies beyond the national territory.

Turkey's activities in Afrin expand the governance of the Kurds through spatial design by transferring it from the domestic (national) to the international arena. Similar to previous work on Turkey's domestic politics of space in Kurdish-populated lands (Cemgil 2021), a spatial analysis adopted here is interested in the *active constitution* of space in ways that produces and reproduces life with an increasingly cross-border dimension. It explores the 'material' and 'discursive' practices through which the construction of space gives way to

new practices, actions and interactions, relations and linkages that are favourable to Turkish interests (Jongerden 2009).

In Turkey's attempts at spatial design targeting Afrin, the first strategy is *displacement and settlement*. The Turkification of Kurdish-populated regions in the country's south and east started well before the establishment of the Turkish Republic. With the formation of the nation-state, the state territory was categorised into zones according to degrees of Turkishness and 'undesirable' regions requiring interventionist policies of assimilation, evacuation and prohibiting or allowing settlement. 'Settlement and resettlement policies had constituted a specific set of spatial practices in moulding the *East* as part of the national territory' (Gündoğan 2011, 399). Displacement and settlement are spatial (re)design arrangements because the idea is to reconstruct the physical space to weaken and even erase the presence of the Kurdish ethnic 'Other'. Early republican practices of Turkification through spatial design involved the physical destruction of homes, villages and cultural heritage, ethnic cleansing, dispossession, as well as large infrastructural projects to transform lived experiences in 'problematic' regions (Öktem 2004).

The replacement of counterinsurgency operations from urban areas to Turkey's rural south-east retained and further expanded forced migration and settlement as a state policy of spatial redesign. A multilayered administrative structure was put into practice to shape the spatiality of settlement in Kurdish-majority regions, including administrative clustering, the strengthening and polarisation of economic linkages between the 'core' and the 'periphery' in vertical and horizontal ways; and the production of common cultural spaces to foster national identity (Jongerden 2007). Turkish army's counterinsurgency strategy of field domination through village eviction and destruction was followed by infrastructural projects, such as the building of dams, tunnels and irrigation systems, which caused large-scale damaging effects for the environment. 'Once this process is completed, the geography gains a new appearance beyond recognition' and either precludes possibilities of return migration or creates strong disincentives against it (Öktem 2004, 566).

In addition to these material practices, Turkey has engaged in *discursive reconstruction* to exclude Kurds from spatial representations. *Naming* is one such discursive practice. Naming as a toponymical strategy relates to spatial design because it modifies the meanings and values ascribed to a particular space, thereby constructing a new relationship between identity and space (Öktem 2004). Naming has occupied a key position in Turkey's ethnonationalist project of Turkification across the state territory (Jongerden 2009; Öktem 2004). Discursive strategies took the form of making claims over certain locations to mobilise alternative histories, narratives, memories and cultures other than those of dominant groups within these particular geographies. Already started in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, name changes (e.g. of evacuated villages) continued after the foundation of the republic. The establishment of the 'Expert Commission on Name Change' in 1956 was the culmination of these efforts, upon which various state institutions set to what the Commission described as the 'Turkification of place names which are of non-Turkish origin and might therefore lead to misunderstandings' (Quoted in Öktem 2004, 569). Thousands of village names were changed, for example, from Armenian and Kurdish to Turkish. Toponymical interventions continued in later decades with other *discursive reconstruction* practices of placing nationalist symbols (e.g. statues) across public space to accentuate the Turkishness of the nation. In Kurdish-majority geographies, another common practice was putting nationalist slogans and the Turkish flag on hills and at city gates (Jongerden 2009; Öktem 2004). Taken together,

discursive reconstruction has functioned as an ‘erasure of the “Other”’ (Jongerden 2009, 7); spatially, it is the incorporation of places associated with ‘the Other’ into Turkish space, or, the conversion of space from one form to another.

Expansion of Kurdish policies through spatial design

Based on the preceding literature review, this section examines two spatial strategies through which Turkey has been expanding its Kurdish policies to Afrin. The first practice of spatial design is *displacement and settlement*. *Operation Olive Branch* problematised Afrin’s physical and social environment as a totality, which justified particular military responses and spatial practices of exclusion/inclusion through containing and filtering human mobility. The second spatial strategy is *discursive reconstruction*, which is about reworking symbols, values and meanings assigned to Afrin’s space to marginalise and exclude the Kurdish language and the Kurdish identity. Instead, Arabness and Turkishness have been brought to the fore as *constitutive* of the region’s collective identity.

Displacement and settlement

The key elements of Turkey’s ‘field domination doctrine’ targeting the PKK in the 1990s are nowadays being deployed in Afrin against YPG/PKK forces. In its promotional video prepared for *Operation Olive Branch* (Turkey’s Ministry of National Defence n.d.), the Turkish Army utilises spatial representations that are reminiscent of its domestic counterinsurgency approach. The video, which joins Turkish soldiers throughout the entire military operation in real-time, contains detailed descriptions along with visual representation of space to demonstrate how Afrin has been turned into a physical and social environment enabling and fostering YPG activities. To start with, Afrin and its surroundings are depicted as negative environments. This is done through the fixation of space by the totalising image of a battlefield. Derek Gregory argues that counterinsurgency necessitates the production and performance of ‘imaginative geographies’. Networks of spatially fluid activities are fixed in a bounded space as the locus of terrorism (Gregory 2004). Imaginative geographies are totalising practices as they configure *all* terrain as the site of battle and thereby the legitimate target of military interventions (Graham 2012). Throughout *Operation Olive Branch*, Afrin was subjected to similar spatial constructions. YPG/PKK terrorists were imagined to be operating in and from *everywhere* (CNN Türk 2018). Afrin’s urban life, countryside and even the subterranean were folded into a totality representing the bounded space of YPG/PKK terrorism. As a result, spatial distinctions, such as between the rural and the urban, collapsed, as the entirety of Afrin became a battlefield. This territorialisation – the construction of the pervasiveness of the terrorist threat across space – enabled the justification of a full-scale war through the coordinated use of ground and air forces in a multidimensional and multi-scalar manner.

At the heart of this totalising gaze was the designation of topography as a force multiplier for the YPG/PKK. Hills are problematised not only for being the battlefields from which the YPG attacks the Turkish army. But hills are also war zones due to their fulfilment of subterranean functions. In recounting the course of *Operation Olive Branch*, Turkish state officials speak of dozens of tunnels that they discovered upon taking control of the hills from the YPG (CNN Türk 2018). Tunnels are ubiquitous in Middle Eastern conflicts and are instrumental

in asymmetrical warfare between the conflict parties ranging from state to non-state actors. Tunnels in the conflicts across the Middle East assume both military and economic functions, such as offensive/defensive purposes along with smuggling and organised crime (Steenkamp 2022). These subterranean dimensions of conflict were widely present in the context of *Operation Olive Branch*. Tunnels are said to have provided shelter for combatants during the Turkish military's offensive and played a key role in transporting ammunition and subsistence. Through this topographical linking, residential areas ('meskun mahal' as the Turkish army puts it) are incorporated into the totality of Afrin as a terrorist space. The city of Afrin and the villages across the Afrin district are folded into the imaginative geography of the battlefield. Village houses, hospitals and schools become problematic spaces where snipers are stationed and fighters take shelter. With every residential area that the Turkish army seized from the PYD forces, photos and videos were shared with the public that blurred the distinction between combatant and non-combatant spaces. This visual material shows grenades hidden in toys and balls in the classrooms and houses (CNN Türk 2018).

In mobilising its 'field domination doctrine' against the PKK throughout 1993, Turkish Armed Forces considered Kurdish-majority rural areas as 'suspect' spaces. This, as Jongerden (2007) argues, prompted military interventions to isolate the PKK from their livelihoods. The solution was evacuating villages categorised as negative environments and the resettlement of the local population across Turkey.

Displacement and (re)settlement were also integral to *Operation Olive Branch* and related military interventions carried out by Turkey's affiliated groups in Syria. However, when compared to the domestic discourse in the 1990s, there is a remarkable difference in Turkey's framing of non-combatant inhabitants of Afrin. While the suspect category was widely ascribed to Kurdish civilians across the south-east of Turkey (Jongerden 2007), Turkey refrained from using a securitising language for the Afrin people. For Derek Gregory, a common practice in international counterinsurgency operations is that civilians are reduced to an object of security rather than active subjects. Things are done to these individuals; they are at the receiving end of security. This, as Gregory continues, empties non-combatant populations of counterinsurgency of their political subjecthood as their voices are silenced and agency is erased (Gregory 2004). Similarly, *Operation Olive Branch* mobilised a narrative of victimhood, which represented Afrin's local population as oppressed people whose rights were violated and whose livelihoods were destroyed by YPG's terrorist activities. Turkish state officials frequently stated that the military intervention was to ensure the safety of both domestic citizens and the Syrian population, whether Arabs, Kurds or Turkmens. In its announcement of the launch of *Operation Olive Branch*, the Turkish Armed Forces defined one of its goals as the neutralisation of the terrorists and saving the Afrin people from terrorism's oppression and cruelty (Dünya Gazetesi 2018). What is left out of this depoliticised narrative around victimhood is the agency of those whose role was limited to objects of security. Shortly after *Operation Olive Branch* started, protests erupted in the city of Afrin with thousands of locals carrying PYD and PKK flags and objecting to Turkey's military intervention (Euronews 2018). These have not found a place in Turkish narratives on the operation.

The framing of Afrin's population as victims of terrorism continued in the aftermath of the operation. In his report about the situation on-site, Turkey's Chief of Staff, Hulusi Akar, contended that civilians, who had been subjected to oppression and violence in the hands of the terrorists, were able to come back to their homes in peace and security (TRT News 2018). Since the beginning of the intervention, Turkey repeatedly stated that the aim and

outcome of *Operation Olive Branch* have been returning Afrin to its 'rightful owners'. However, developments paint a different picture. In fact, *Operation Olive Branch* resulted in a large-scale demographic change in Afrin to the detriment of Kurds. According to estimates, some of which rely on previous official census numbers made public by the Syrian state, Afrin's population before 2011 was around 500,000 people. The majority of inhabitants were Kurdish, whose numbers ranged from 300,000 to 350,000 prior to *Operation Olive Branch* (Al-Hilu 2019; Eralp 2020). Turkey's military operation caused a massive flight of the local Kurds who fled to the countryside leaving homes vacated and agricultural fields unattended (Adar 2020; Asseburg 2020). Researchers estimate that around half of Afrin's population have since been displaced with many leaving the city shortly after the arrival of the Turkish armed forces and its Syrian allies (Al-Hilu 2019). Sharing similar calculations, the United Nations Refugee Agency – as of November 2018 – provided humanitarian aid to around 40,000 displaced inhabitants of Afrin in four camps as well as around the Aleppo city (UNHCR 2018).

The displacement and dispossession of Afrin's Kurdish inhabitants have gone hand in hand with the settlement of non-Kurdish population groups from across Syria. As local Kurds were fleeing, thousands of Arabs and Turkmens arrived in Afrin from other parts of the country (Günaydin 2022). The latter primarily originated from regions that had been strongholds for rebel groups, particularly the Eastern Ghouta region (Kajjo 2020), while many others came from Homs and Daraa. The newcomers were themselves displaced following the April 2018 defeat of opposition forces in Eastern Ghouta. Analysts argue that these population movements were the result of a 'swap agreement' (STJ and Synergy 2023) and 'territorial exchanges' (COAR 2019) between Turkey and Russia, who have the two main actors in Syria. *Operation Olive Branch* commenced right after Russia withdrew its military observers from Afrin 'in what appears to have been an agreement with Turkey' (McGee 2019, 124). This was interpreted as Russia having given greenlight to Turkey's entering Afrin (Al-Hilu 2019). As *Operation Olive Branch* was ongoing, the rebels in Eastern Ghouta finally surrendered to the Syrian government. Three weeks later, at the beginning of April 2018, a reconciliation agreement over Eastern Ghouta is reported to have been reached with the Assad regime through Turkish diplomatic involvement (COAR 2019). Accordingly, a large-scale evacuation took place in Eastern Ghouta within a few days after the agreement. Around 66,000 people were forcibly moved from Eastern Ghouta to Northern Syria and many of them ended up in Afrin (COAR 2019). This, Al-Hilu (2019) argues, was seen as an opportunity for the Turkish state to change the demographics of Afrin through forced settlement.

About one year after *Operation Olive Branch*, new arrivals in Afrin are believed to be around 88,000. Many of those who were displaced to Afrin from other parts of Syria took over the homes left behind the Kurds (Kajjo 2020). These relocation practices are not simply ad hoc responses to ongoing events. Testimonies from Afrin locals along with journalists and humanitarian workers in Afrin demonstrate that violations in the area of housing, land and property are mainly ethnic-based and are done by a myriad of actors, including SNA factions but also the Turkish military in areas under its control (McGee 2019; PÊL–Civil Waves Organization 2023). While SNA factions are responsible for most of the documented cases of seizure destruction and looting of homes, businesses and agricultural lands, including Afrin's olive fields, there are also reports where the Turkish army was involved in similar violations. Irrespective of the 'actual' perpetrator, Turkey's position as an occupying power in Afrin obliges it to protect civilians and civilian property (PÊL–Civil Waves Organization 2023). The Turkish army has reportedly turned evacuated buildings, including ones used

for administrative purposes, into military bases and operational centres (McGee 2019). Moreover, upon entering Afrin, Turkey and its allied forces terminated the activities of committees that were documenting displacement and producing documentation and residency permits to people who had moved to Afrin from across Syria. These Arabs and Turkmens were instead given identity cards from the Afrin local council (Al-Hilu 2019), which was dissolved after *Operation Olive Branch*.

Spatial design has also utilised *selective permeability* through concomitant practices of facilitating and hampering mobility in/out of Afrin. The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) documents the widespread deployment of checkpoints by the Turkish military and its Syrian allies since 2018, which continues to date. Checkpoints across the Afrin district, such as the one in the village of Kimar, have facilitated certain forms of flows at the expense of others. During the relocation of Arabs and Turkmens from Eastern Ghouta and other places, checkpoints functioned as filtering devices. Vehicle and identity inspections authorised entries of relocated people while local Kurds who had recently been replaced were not permitted entry and had to wait for days and even weeks at the checkpoints (SOHR 2018a). Moreover, checkpoints are sites for data collection. People entering Afrin have had to follow strict procedures of control, including searches and interrogation. During the arrival of displaced people from Eastern Ghouta, biometric means of surveillance were used at Afrin's checkpoints, such as the recording of fingerprints and eye prints (SOHR 2018b). Taken together, these practices have disadvantaged the local Kurdish population, whose presence in and relationship with physical space have been fundamentally altered through Turkey's military intervention.

Discursive reconstruction

In Turkey's ethnonationalist project through spatial design, discursive reconstruction has played a vital role in state attempts to transform the country's south-eastern periphery. This involved struggles over space to transform the spatiality of Kurdish-populated lands and integrate it into the dominant language, histories, memories and culture of the nation. Practices involved replacing symbols, meanings and values attached to Kurdish spaces, leading to the exclusion of the Kurds from spatial representations (Aslan 2015; Jongerden 2009).

This project of discursive reconstruction through spatial design now operates extraterritorially as Turkey acts upon Afrin's space to generate and reproduce collective identities. Ethnonationalism has been the driving force in the domestic operation of Turkey's Kurdish policies through space. In Afrin, space remains a key factor in the way that Turkey deals with the Kurds. Here, the idea is not so much about essentialising identity through ethnonationalist – Turkish – lines as shaping collective identities of the region through claims over space. Despite this difference, the marginalisation and erasure of Kurdish identity remains central to spatial interventions.

Throughout the operation, Turkey and its affiliated groups embarked upon discursive reconstruction using a variety of practices. The first is the destruction of cultural symbols. Upon entering Afrin city on 18 March 2018, SNA factions destroyed the 'Kaveh the Blacksmith' statue – a historical symbol of Kurdish resistance (BIANET English 2025). The second type of discursive reconstruction is the inscription of Turkish national symbols, memories and histories. Already during *Operation Olive Branch*, Turkey started making ground claims in particular locations. On 1 March 2018, a hill in Raju was seized by the Turkish army following intense fights with the YPG. The army not only placed the Turkish flag on top of the hill, but

also changed its name to Turkish – *Şehitler Ölmez (Martyrs never Die)* – in commemoration of the 9 soldiers who lost their lives during the operation. When Afrin city came under Turkish control on 18 March 2018, PYD/YPG flags were taken down and replaced by Turkish ones in key governance buildings and across the public space. The army celebrated the end of *Operation Olive Branch* with the note that 18 March is the anniversary of the *Çanakkale Victory and Martyrs' Day*, which is when the then Ottoman Empire defeated Allied Powers on the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 (Turkey's Ministry of National Defence [n.d.](#)). Regarded as one of its greatest historical victories, Turkey attaches great importance to the 18 March Çanakkale Victory in its national memory. The symbolic importance of the event largely relates to its association with anti-imperialism by preventing the Allied Powers' occupation of Istanbul and potential incursion into Anatolia.

The discursive linkage between the military victory in Afrin and Çanakkale is, therefore, more than a temporal coincidence. It is situated within the Turkish state's narrative that PYD and YPG are not acting for the people of Syria but for imperialist powers who are providing these groups with weapons, ammunition and military vehicles (Presidency of Republic of Türkiye 2019). This, as Turkey claims, makes *Operation Olive Branch* an anti-imperialist action and the correspondence of two historical dates is to be celebrated with the Turkish flag, granting the occupation of Afrin its symbolic power rooted in Turkey's national history.

A third practice is renaming places. Upon the completion of the operation, squares/road junctures around Afrin were (re)named, including the change of the name of the Newroz Square to Selahaddin/*Salaheddin* (Deutsche Welle 2018). In May 2024, Turkey's pro-Kurdish DEM Party Deputy Cengiz Çiçek submitted a parliamentary question regarding the 'Turkification' of Kurdish places in Afrin. The parliamentary question specifies the following changes of Afrin's public space names (squares or road junctions) Afrin: Azadî Square to Atatürk Square; Watanî Juncture to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Juncture; Kawa Hesinkar Juncture to Zeytin Dalı (Olive Branch) Juncture. Renaming also applied to villages. In the parliamentary question, Çiçek lists numerous villages whose names, as local sources report, have been changed from Kurdish to Turkish. Among the renamed places are Kûtana now Selçuk Obası; Qestel Mixdad now Zafer Obası; Xelîloko now Halilak Obası; and Kurzilê Çê now Cafer Obası (Artı Gerçek 2024). A fourth practice is the change of signage on public buildings. Turkish and Arabic signage were placed on Afrin's public buildings. The promotional video of *Operation Olive Branch* shows Afrin Hospital's name written in two languages: Arabic and Turkish (Turkey's Ministry of National Defence [n.d.](#)). Signage of other parks and municipal buildings is also only in Arabic and Turkish.

In addition to these forms of discursive reconstruction, Turkish-language curriculum has been introduced in Afrin's school that have been established since the operation (Günaydın 2022). On 23 April 2019, Turkey's National Sovereignty and Children's Day was celebrated for the first time in Afrin. Songs were sung and event banners were hung – both in Arabic and Turkish only (Anadolu Ajansı 2019). Kurdish was excluded from these spatial representations infusing the idea that Arabness and Turkishness are the two constitutive elements of the region's collective identity.

All these practices happen in the context of the gradual administrative integration of Afrin into Turkey. Following each cross-border military operation in Northern Syria, Turkish state institutions implemented a comprehensive strategy of linking the occupied areas to governorates in south-eastern Turkey. The Governor of Kilis, for example, administers the region of Azaz, whereas the Governor of Gaziantep oversees the regions of Jarablus and al-Bab.

Afrin is administered by Turkey's Hatay province which supervises the activities of the Afrin local council and manages the provision of Afrin's public services, such as education and health (Al-Hilu 2019; Günaydın 2022). Discursive reconstruction is part of Afrin's integration into Turkey's administrative system. The naming of Afrin's hospital in only Arabic and Turkish can only be fully grasped when considering that the Hatay province took over the licencing of hospitals in the city in the post-operation period. It was the same Hatay province that appointed a Turkish director to the Afrin hospital (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). This is only one example of Turkey's widespread agenda of transforming Afrin's administration by acting on local governance structures, demography, security and the military sector and the local economy (Al-Hilu 2019; Asseburg 2020; Yüksel and van Veen 2019).

Conclusion

This article analysed *Operation Olive Branch* from a spatial perspective. A cross-border operation conducted by the Turkish army in the Syrian Kurdish majority city of Afrin in the early months of 2018, *Operation Olive Branch*, was presented as an urgency whose only goal was said to destroy terrorist networks in Northern Syria. Notwithstanding the Turkish official discourse, the military operation was soon to be joined by practices to redesign the spatiality of Afrin in a manner that mimics long-lasting domestic efforts to tame the Kurds. Turkey's counterinsurgency strategy against the PKK through spatial interventions is exported to Northern Syria not to mould the region through ethnonationalist lines but to transform lives and lived experiences in the region, emptied of any threatening Kurdish presence in both material and discursive ways. Two spatial strategies have been taken from domestic politics and reappropriated to transform the spatiality of Afrin: *displacement and settlement*; and *discursive reconstruction*. The above analysis offers empirics as to the workings of this spatial reproduction.

The material and discursive practices of governing Syrian Kurds through space matter also because of historical continuities with earlier policies of 'Arabisation' by the Syrian government. Known also as the 'Arab Belt' project, Arabisation targeted Syria's Kurdish-populated border areas in the east and the north (along the Turkish border). Starting from the 1960s, the Syrian government became alarmed about Kurdish political movements in Iraq. These worries culminated in state actions that deprived the Kurds of their political and cultural rights and subjected them to discrimination and marginalisation. One early example is the large-scale disenfranchisement of Syrian Kurds. Following a census done in the Hassakeh government in 1962, around 120.000 Kurds were stripped of their nationality and as a result became stateless in a short amount of time. Classified as 'foreigners' from then on, the Kurds of Syria faced obstacles in housing, land and registration matters (McGee 2019). These restrictions under the rule of the former president Hafez al-Assad were accompanied by the forced migration of Arabs to Kurdish lands (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). Furthermore, the Syrian government implemented a programme of discursive erasure and reconstruction – not unlike those deployed in post-2018 Afrin. Under Hafez al-Assad, Kurdish language teaching was forbidden and Kurdish cultural celebrations were repressed, including in Afrin (Ceasefire Centre for Civilian Rights and YASA 2020). *Operation Olive Branch* is therefore neither novel nor unprecedented in managing Syrian Kurds through spatial means. Rather, it reproduces and adds to already existing material and discursive practices aiming to exclude and efface the Kurdish 'Other' across Syria.

Another historical continuity is the fundamental role of spatial organisation in Turkey's conduct of counterinsurgency. Space and spatial organisation are integral to counterinsurgency rather than the latter's side-effects or unintended consequences. Military control, settlements and infrastructural arrangements, which are justified by reference to counterinsurgency in reality intend for spatial reproduction that promotes particular forms of life at the expense of others (Gregory 2004). In analysing the Turkish state's policy of forced displacement of Kurds in the fight against the PKK throughout the 1990s, Jongerden compellingly argues the following: 'The evacuation of the rural settlements was no collateral damage or simple reprisal, but a constituent part of the counterinsurgency program' (Jongerden 2007, 78). Turkey's operations in Afrin show similar dynamics. While *Operation Olive Branch* was legitimised as an anti-terror operation targeting the YPG/PYD, the timing of the military intervention suggests a more complicated explanation. After years of relatively 'amicable relations' with PYD (Cemgil 2021), Turkey commenced its military operation in Afrin – along with other areas of Northern Syria, when the PYD's attempts to link the three cantons of the AANES signified – in the eyes of the Turkish state – a threatening move towards realisation of a spatially contagious Kurdistan. *Operation Olive Branch* was to undo any progress of territorial linking achieved by the AANES and spatial (re)design was the instrument – not merely collateral damage or outcome.

A major regional development was the overthrow of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Having ended five decades of Assad family rule in Syria, the December 2024 regime fall has raised hopes for the Syrian people, including Syrian Kurds. Noteworthy to mention is the March 2025 agreement between the Syrian Democratic Forces represented by Commander Mazloum Abdi and Ahmad al-Shar'a, who is the current President of Syria. In Article 5 of the agreement, the signatories have committed themselves to 'Guaranteeing the return of all displaced Syrians to their towns and villages while ensuring their protection by the Syrian state' (ANHA Hawar News 2025). It is too early to assess the practical implementation of the March 2025 agreement and what it means for Turkey's involvement in Syria with regard to Kurds. This is one gap that future research can address.

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