

Sun, sea and suppression: How our Turkish holidays fund a fascist state

AS lockdown eases, many people's thoughts will be turning to the possibility of a foreign holiday, and travel agents are setting out their offers, desperate to make up for lost time and lost money. Among their tempting destinations will be Turkey. But holidaying in that country has consequences.

The Turkish state has been crushing all opposition internally, and carrying out brutal invasions of its neighbours – and the money it gets from tourism helps pay for this. In 2019, tourism brought \$34.5 billion to Turkey, and 2.5 million of the 52 million visitors were British nationals. Part of this money was spent with public companies, such as the 50% state-owned Turkish Airlines, and another part fed into government spending via taxation – all of which helped fund Turkey's \$20.4 billion military expenditure.

The Turkish republic was founded on ethnic nationalism, and under the current government this nationalism has added a new militant Islamism and an aggressive imperialism, as well as intolerance of criticism and cultural difference.

The large Kurdish minority has formed a constant target of state aggression – for its refusal to give up Kurdish culture and language, and for its widespread support for socialist secular democracy. The electoral success of the pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) has prompted major and brutal crackdowns.

The European Kurdish Democratic Societies Congress (KCD-E), which is an umbrella group for Kurdish associations in Europe and beyond, is firm on the need for boycott. A recent statement, renewing their boycott call, explains: “The profits made through tourists from abroad are an essential basis for the continuation of the war against the Kurdish people. The boycott of Turkey tourism is therefore a “human obligation”... every cent spent on holidays in Turkey is a weapon against the Kurdish people.”

Despite international calls for warring parties to cease and allow the world to fight the coronavirus pandemic, Turkey has been ratcheting up its aggression while attention has been focused on this global threat.

When a holiday website writes that “Turkey's got the wow factor”, this is probably not what they are thinking of – but it ought to be. The extent to which the Turkish

government has clamped down on dissident voices, and anyone who doesn't fit its deeply conservative religious nationalism, should be enough to make jaws drop.

While the world's been in lockdown, Turkey has continued to lock-up democratically elected MPs and mayors, to round up community activists, and to arrest anyone who criticises the government response to the pandemic.

On June 4 they detained two MPs from the HDP and one from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), after first stripping them of office. On May 15, the government seized control of a further five HDP-run municipalities. It has now taken over 45 of the 65 elected last year, and 22 co-mayors are in prison, along with some 5000 other party members, including the former co-chairs. This staggered coup against elected representatives is harder to rally against than a single all-out attack, but no less deadly.

On May 22, police raided Rosa Women's Association in Ahmed (Diyarbakir), which campaigns to stop violence against women; and they raided the homes of activists involved with the association, Peace Mothers – whose children have been disappeared by the state – and of members of the Free Women's Movement, who have fought against the draft law that would allow rapists of girls under 18 to be pardoned if they marry their victim. Eighteen people were arrested in these raids and 12 were detained in prison.

On May 5, a statement from the Turkish government reported that their investigation of social media comments on the situation with respect to Covid-19 had led to 496 detentions and 10 arrests.

Imprisonment may be cause for even more concern than normal in this time of pandemic, especially in the conditions of overcrowding and poor hygiene and healthcare that are found in Turkish prisons. The Turkish government responded to international calls for prisoner release by letting out common criminals, including a notorious mafia leader, but they still detain all political prisoners, even those on remand.

Meanwhile, in Syria, Turkey continues to flout the ceasefires they agreed with both the US and Russia, and to bomb and shoot at Kurdish villages. So far, they have not carried out another major attack that might generate international condemnation, but

smaller strikes have become a constant, along with threats of something bigger, such as an attack on the city of Kobane.

AS if this were not bad enough, Turkey continues to endanger civilian lives and livelihoods by shutting off the water that supplies hundreds of thousands of homes in Heseke, and by setting fire to crops ripening in the fields.

In areas they have captured, Turkey continues to attempt to eradicate anything that is Kurdish, from cultural artifacts and language to the majority of the Kurdish population, which is being

deliberately replaced with the families of jihadi mercenaries in Turkey's employ.

Local families who have not escaped from the occupied areas face a situation similar to rule by Daesh, which should not be surprising as many of the mercenaries now fighting for Turkey formerly fought for Daesh, which itself benefited from various forms of Turkish support.

In Afrin, kidnapping and rape have become such regular occurrences that, outwith Kurdish circles, they no longer register as news. Turkish bombing raids into Iraqi Kurdistan continue to generate civilian casualties, including three women who died in a Turkish attack on Maxmur refugee camp on April 15.

Turkey's imperial ambitions don't stop at taking over Kurdish majority areas. In north-west Syria they continue to support a coalition of violent jihadi gangs that have taken over what was once a broad-based opposition. On May 26, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that, since February 2, 6845 Turkish trucks and military vehicles had entered Syria, and more than 10,400 Turkish soldiers had been deployed in Idlib and Aleppo. Turkey is also recruiting young Syrians to fight in the civil war in Libya, where they are supporting the government, with whom they have lucrative and strategic deals over oil drilling in the Mediterranean.

The same source noted on 24 May 24 that some 10,100 Syrian mercenaries had been sent by Turkey to Libya, and a further 3400 had been sent to Turkey for military training.

All these interventions and movements of people make the world a much more dangerous place, not just now but for decades into the future.

This is about power and money – and the president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman dream – but it is also about distracting attention from economic and political troubles at home. For all the strongman posing, Erdogan presides over a bitterly divided country.

That he has been able to survive so long has been down to a mixture of economic growth and divide-and-rule politics that uses ethno-religious racism to blame all problems on minorities and dissidents. Turkey’s neoliberal boom is in trouble, but one of the few areas that has allowed the government to save face has been the growing tourist industry.

If, despite all this, you still decide to go to Turkey on holiday, then remember, when you visit historic sites, that monuments in Kurdish areas, such as the walled city of Sur and the ancient archaeology of Hasankeyf, have been deliberately destroyed.

Remember, when you tan in your bikini, that those who campaign for women’s freedom can risk arrest. Remember, when you listen to music in the evening, that those who sing in Kurdish can spend years in jail.

Remember that, in the world of big multi-faceted corporations, companies that own hotels and airlines may often also work for the military, and that successful companies often have strong links with powerful people in government.

This is not what most of us will want to think about on our holiday. Holidays should be a time when we can get away from political worries, but our escape from everyday cares does not have to contribute to making others’ lives harder.

For information on the wider boycott campaign, see boycott-turkey.net