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THE TROUBLE WITH TURKEY

Erdogan, ISIS, and the Kurds

Michael J. Totten

Turkey, a key member of NATO, has so far chosen to sit out the war against ISIS. Instead, it is at war with Kurdish militias in Syria, the only ground forces so far that have managed to take on ISIS and win.

Turkey fears and loathes Kurdish independence anywhere in the world more than it fears and loathes anything else. Kurdish independence in Syria, from Ankara's point of view, could at a minimum escalate a three-decades-long conflict and at worst threaten Turkey's territorial integrity.

Kurds make up between 15 and 25 percent of Turkey's population, but no one knows for sure because the government outlaws ethnic classification. Most live in the southeast near the Syrian and Iraqi borders. Many would like to secede and form an independent state of their own.

They could conceivably do it with enough help from the outside. They have a model in the Kurds in Iraq, who liberated themselves from Saddam Hussein after the first Persian Gulf War and have been independent in all but name ever since. The civil war in Syria has allowed the Kurds there to carve out a space of their own between ISIS and the Assad regime, which is what worries the Turks.

Turkey is a powerful state, but so was Saddam Hussein's government.

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So was Bashar al-Assad's before the rebellion broke out a few years ago.

ISIS is still the JV squad as far as Turkey is concerned, to use President Obama's unfortunate formulation, but Kurdish armed forces have been trying to rip apart the country for decades and therefore Ankara has called in the varsity to deal with them.

Turkish nationalists insist everyone in their country is a Turk whether they like it and admit it or not. The Kurds, according to them, are not a separate people. Rather, they are "mountain Turks who lost their language." But Turkish nationalism, like Arab nationalism, scarcely existed until the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, which expired at the end of World War I. And the truth is that Turkey, as the rump state of that multi-ethnic empire, is a *mélange* of different identities. With its Kurdish, Arab, Zaza, and Alevi minorities, it's no more homogeneous than the rump state of the Soviet empire with the Tatars, Ingush, Sakha, Chechens, and other large numbers of non-Russian peoples on its periphery.

When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the modern republic in the ashes of World War I, Turkish nationalists attempted to unite everybody under a single identity for the sake of national unity and to prevent any more territorial loss, but the Kurds refused to join up because the Western powers had promised them a state of their own. To this day, they remain the largest stateless people on earth. Many feel far more kinship with their fellow Kurds in Iran, Iraq, and Syria than with their nominal countrymen in Turkey.

The Ottoman Empire was loosely confederated, with a space for the Kurds, but modern Turkey was founded as a strong Western-style republic with a powerful center, and the Kurds were forcibly conquered, colonized, and integrated.

The government's response to Kurdish nationalism was tantamount to attempted cultural genocide. Ethnic Kurds were forcibly relocated from the eastern parts of the country, while European Turks were moved to the Kurdish region in the farthest reaches of Anatolia. Even speaking the Kurdish language was forbidden in schools, government offices, and in public places until 1991. Simply saying "I am a Kurd" in Kurdish was a crime, and it's still considered scandalous in official settings. In 2009, a Kurdish politician created a huge controversy by speaking just a few words of Kurdish in the nation's Parliament building.

Despite the fervor of this repression, Turkey's problem with its Kurdish minority is more political than ethnic. As Erik Meyersson at the Stockholm School of Economics put it, "It is less an inherent dislike for Kurds that drives state repression of this minority than the state's fear for the institutional consequences and loss of centralized power."

Beginning in 1984, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK—initially backed by the Soviet Union—has waged an on-again, off-again guerrilla and terrorist war against the Turkish state that has killed more than 45,000 people, according to government figures. That's almost as many as Americans killed during the Vietnam War.

Most of the dead are Kurdish. The Turkish military dished out unspeakable punishment in the east of the country. Nine years ago, I drove from Istanbul to northern Iraq and was shocked to discover that Iraqi Kurdistan is a vastly more prosperous and pleasant place than bombed-out and repressed Turkish Kurdistan. Turkey was once seen as a semi-plausible candidate for the European Union, yet the Kurdish parts of Iraq—one of the most dysfunctional and broken countries on earth—were and are doing much better than the Kurdish region of Turkey.

From mid-2013 to mid-2015, the Turkish state and the PKK enjoyed a period of relative calm under a cease-fire, but in late July the army bombed PKK positions in northern Iraq, and the PKK in Turkey declared the cease-fire void. A wave of attacks against police stations swept over the country in August. An enduring peace between the two sides now seems as elusive as ever.

The Turkish establishment has been alarmed by the existence of an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq since the day it was founded and has repeatedly threatened to invade if it declares independence from Baghdad. (That may be the only reason the Iraqi Kurds haven't yet done it.) And it's doubly alarmed now that the Kurds of Syria have cobbled together their own autonomous region, which they call Rojava, while the Arabs of Syria fight a devastating civil war with each other. And the Turkish establishment is *triply* alarmed because the Kurdish militias in Syria—the YPG, or People's Protection Units—are aligned with the PKK.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan—like most of his ethnic Turkish countrymen—is terrified that an independent Syrian Kurdistan will help Turkish Kurdistan wage a revolutionary war against Ankara. Fairly or not, Erdogan sees Rojava much the way the Israelis see Hezbollah-occupied southern Lebanon.

Ideally the Syrian Kurds wouldn't side with the PKK. The PKK has committed crimes in Turkey and is a willing belligerent in a long and terrible war. The Turks are not imagining this or making it up, and there is no shortage of Kurds elsewhere in the region who share Erdogan's dim view of the PKK and its allies.

"They are very fanatic in their nationalism," Abdullah Mohtadi told me in Iraqi Kurdistan years ago. He's the head of the Komala Party, a formerly Communist left-liberal Iranian Kurdish group living in exile in Iraq. "They are very undemocratic in nature. They have no principles, no friendship, no contracts, no values. In the name of the Kurdish movement, they eliminate everybody."

The United States, though, is backing the Syrian Kurds. We have to. They're the only ground force capable of fighting ISIS and winning. The only other options in Syria are the repulsive Assad regime, Hezbollah, Sunni Islamists that will inevitably turn on the United States, the al-Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, and a handful of relatively moderate but irrelevant Sunni groups that have already effectively lost.

The Kurds are all that's left.

And the Kurds are the most pro-American people in the entire Middle East. They're more pro-American than the Israelis. Ideologically, yes, the PKK-aligned groups are a bit iffy. They were once Soviet proxies and they're at war with a member of NATO. But the Turks share at least half of the blame for that conflict. Nowhere in the region will Kurdish people accept cultural genocide lying down. Surely they would have accepted help from the United States had it been offered during the Cold War, but it wasn't, so they took largesse and ideology from the Russians instead.

For what it's worth, though, the PKK is not what it used to be. The Soviet Union is dead, and a lot of the ideological Marxism its leaders once mouthed has been diluted over time to standard-issue leftism with a culturally conservative twist. The Kurds of Turkey and Syria are not struggling for the collectivization of agriculture. They are not interested in liquidating landlords or "the kulaks." They certainly aren't interested in imposing a police state in Ankara. First and foremost, they're fighting against the fascists of ISIS, and second for Kurdish independence, a secular system of government, and equality between men and women. They detest the Islamic religion as much as far-right "Islamophobes" in America. Compared with just about everyone else in the region, they're liberals.

Not in any alternate universe would the United States oppose these

people right now. The Kurds of Iran and Iraq are more politically palatable, but you fight a proxy war with the proxies you have, and Americans will never find a better proxy in Syria against ISIS than the Kurdish People's Protection Units.

Turkey, however, sees everything differently. Early this summer, Erdogan was enraged when Kurdish forces in Syria liberated the town of Tel Abyad from ISIS, and the Turkish military drew up a plan to invade Syria, not to fight ISIS but to set up a 30-kilometer-deep buffer zone to prevent the Syrian Kurds from controlling their own home country.

"We will never allow the establishment of a state on our southern border in the north of Syria," Erdogan said. "We will continue our fight in that respect whatever the cost may be."

Ponder the ramifications of that hard-line assertion for a moment. Our NATO ally was enraged because ISIS lost territory and says it's willing to invade Syria, not to fight ISIS, but to suppress American allies.

American foreign policy makers and analysts have been arguing for years which is worse, the Syrian-Iranian-Hezbollah axis or ISIS. Obviously they are both awful. ISIS is more likely to kill Americans at home and abroad, but Iran is the world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism. In Turkey, however, the argument is over whether ISIS or *the Kurds* is the greater evil.

Ankara doesn't *like* ISIS. It has nothing in common with ISIS. But unlike the Kurds, ISIS hasn't been at war with the Turkish government for the last 30 years. In that respect, ISIS is, from the Turks' point of view, the lesser of two evils.

"ISIS commanders told us to fear nothing at all [from Turkey]," a former ISIS communications technician told *Newsweek*, "because there was full cooperation with the Turks and they reassured us that nothing will happen... ISIS saw the Turkish army as its ally especially when it came to attacking the Kurds in Syria. The Kurds were the common enemy for both ISIS and Turkey."

President Obama has complained that Turkey could do "more" to stop the influx of "militants" into Syria. Turkey certainly could! Turkey has a long border with Syria, but it's sealed. I've driven alongside it. In some areas, there are minefields everywhere.

Turkey has a world-class army—the second-largest in NATO—and

could obliterate ISIS from the face of the earth if it wanted. If the Kurdish People's Protection Units can make headway into ISIS-held territory with just a ragtag militia, Turkey could liberate the Syrian population from Assad, Hezbollah, and ISIS simultaneously.

But for years Erdogan has been reluctant even to shore up that border.

"You should understand something," a Turkish smuggler said to Jamie Dettmer of the *Daily Beast*. "It isn't hard to cross into the caliphate [ISIS-held territory], but go further west or east into Kurdish territory, then it gets much harder to evade the Turkish military and cross the border. Even the birds can't come from there; and our birds can't go there."

Turkey is not Iraq. It is 1,000 years ahead of Iraq. It is a serious and capable nation, the opposite of incompetent. It's not an accident or a coincidence that ISIS has been able to replenish its ranks over the Turkish border while the Kurds couldn't. If Erdogan can stop Kurds from crossing that border, he can stop ISIS from crossing that border. Refusing to do so was a choice.

He is not a state sponsor of terrorism. He is not championing ISIS, nor is he on side with them ideologically. He is not their patron or armorer. But he has spent years letting one of our worst enemies grow stronger while stomping on one of our best regional allies.

The United States has forged ugly alliances too, first in aligning itself with the Soviet Union against the Nazis and then by backing Latin American military dictatorships to prevent Communism from spreading in the Western Hemisphere beyond Cuba and Nicaragua. The United States also sided with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War.

Later, however, we reversed every one of these odious alliances.

President Truman collaborated with Stalin against Hitler, but he immediately shifted into a Cold War stance against Russia after the Nazis were finished. Washington's support for Latin America's *generalissimos* collapsed completely after the crack-up of the Soviet Union. The American invasion of Panama to topple Manuel Noriega was planned mere days after the Berlin Wall fell and executed the following month. South America's oppressive regimes then fell like dominoes. In 2002, the United States demolished Saddam Hussein's government entirely.

Turkey could likewise reverse itself on ISIS. Turkey doesn't have to like the PKK or any other Kurdish independence movement. That is impossible. All that needs to happen is a recognition in Ankara that ISIS threatens Turkey's interests and security more than the PKK does.

Optimism is rarely rewarded in this region, but there are some indications that an attitude adjustment in Turkey may be under way.

In July, the government finally rounded up hundreds of ISIS members and sent them to prison. It's hard to say for sure what went through Ankara's collective head. Maybe the government only arrested ISIS members to get Western critics off its back. Or perhaps the government finally woke up to the fact that ISIS, unlike the Kurds, is a threat to the entire human race. Maybe Turkey figured it could fight both at once.

Just a few days later, a suicide bomber killed 28 people at a meeting of pro-Kurdish groups in the Turkish city of Suruc, just across the Syrian border from the Kurdish city of Kobane, which ISIS fought for and lost last year. No one claimed responsibility, but it was almost certainly ISIS. Who else would want to strike Turkey and the Kurds simultaneously?

The Kurdish militias are the toughest foes ISIS has yet faced anywhere. Attacking them in Suruc was its way of telling the Kurds that they're unsafe even outside Syria and Iraq. At the same time, ISIS sent a message to Turkey. "We don't *want* to fight you at the moment. Our war is in Syria. But we can strike inside your country whenever we want, so back off."

Turkey would have united against ISIS if ethnic Turks had been killed, but killing Kurds in Turkey did not inspire an immediate response.

"Witnessing the controversy in Turkish public opinion after the attack," Turkish analyst Metin Gurcan wrote in *Al-Monitor*, "and seeing that the political elites could not even come up with a message of unity against such an attack—one has to admit that the attack has served its purpose."

A few days later, the Turkish government finally allowed the United States to use Incirlik Air Base, just 70 miles from the Syrian border, to launch airstrikes over ISIS-held territory—but only if US airpower is not used to support Kurdish militias. So Turkey is sort of coming around, but not really.

Ankara's *only* long-term solution to this conundrum is peace with the Kurds. They aren't going anywhere. They will want out of Turkey, out of Syria, out of Iraq, and out of Iran as long as those countries treat them like second-class citizens or worse.

The good news for Turkey—if the Turks ever wise up enough to figure this out—is that the Kurds are the easiest people in the entire Middle East to make friends with. Americans have managed to do so almost

effortlessly. So have the Israelis. That's saying something in *that* part of the world. The PKK may be intransigent, but if reasonable Kurdish grievances were addressed—including Turkey's hostility toward besieged Kurds in Syria—then support for the PKK in Turkey would likely evaporate.

Making friends with ISIS, however, is impossible.

In their book *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan make a compelling case that “the army of terror will be with us indefinitely.” President Obama agrees. The war against ISIS, he said at the Pentagon in early July, could take decades. President George W. Bush said more or less the same thing about al-Qaeda, and ISIS is simply al-Qaeda in Iraq under new management.

Decades is an awfully long time for a genocidal terrorist state to exist anywhere, and decades is an awfully long time for a NATO ally to support it even indirectly by refusing to act. Turkey cannot continue to do so indefinitely. ISIS probably won't let it: it is violently opposed to everyone in the human race aside from itself—but at the same time we should never underestimate the stubborn refusal of the Turks to work out their differences with the Kurds.

NATO was formed as an anti-Russian bulwark during the Cold War, and ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union many have wondered if the alliance has outlived its usefulness. That question has been put to bed to an extent with Russian malfeasance in Georgia and Ukraine, but if Turkey doesn't fully reverse itself on ISIS at some point, its membership in NATO will clearly become a vestige of an era that expired a long time ago.

Diplomats and heads of state are often the last to notice tectonic geopolitical shifts. They've spent years, even decades, forming relationships with their foreign counterparts. Institutions are cumbersome, bureaucratic, and slow. They cruise on inertia. They have invested so much for so long. But we are where we are.

If the Turks don't eventually reverse themselves fully, the White House, Congress, the State Department, and our genuine allies in NATO will have little choice but to ensure that Turkey is treated accordingly. ●