

The Turks Have a Point

In the drama that has been unfolding in Kobani between the “Islamic State” (IS) and the Kurds, reality has looked different from the Turkish side of the border than it has from Washington, Ottawa and elsewhere. Turkey has been resisting sending ground forces into Syria, and the West would be wise to understand the Turks concerns not just blow them off, much less condemn them as some have done, even questioning continuing Turkish membership in NATO.

At the outset of the Syrian uprising, Ankara attempted to persuade the Assad regime to stop slaughtering its own citizens. When that failed, Turkey sought Western support for a more direct military engagement, proposing no-fly zones and the creation of a safe haven and safe corridors inside Syria for Syrians fleeing the Assad forces. They even contemplated putting Turkish boots on the ground if others would do likewise. But others demurred. The Obama administration was deep in re-election mode, and was campaigning on ending the American military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, not starting a new one in Syria. Further, in strategic mid-pivot to Asia, the US was reluctant to risk getting its foot caught in the Middle East. Others, including the Europeans and Canadians, were likewise unwilling to put boots on the ground, certainly not in Syria, although if Ankara wished to do so they were prepared to hold the Turks’ coats

Turkey and others began to assist the regime’s opponents, and fighters and arms found their way across the border into Syria. Meanwhile “moderate” Syrian resistance progressively lost ground to the extremists, especially the IS, who had territorial ambitions and ideological/theological agendas. The latter directed its Dark Ages barbarism towards Shia, Christian, Turkomen, Yazidi and other minorities in Iraq and Syria and threatened Iraqi Kurdistan, America’s ally in the 2003 war, as well. The IS captured Mosul, and proceeded to declare a Caliphate and gruesomely to execute Western innocents, virtually daring NATO and Arab countries to intervene. The Obama-led coalition of Western and some Arab countries mobilized behind the Americans’ decision to use air power to bolster the ground efforts of the Iraqi army, the Kurds, and others in order to degrade and destroy the IS. Turkey, against its better judgment about the strategy and under pressure, joined in.

Kobani, a heretofore obscure, small but strategic city on the Turkish border is defended against the IS by a Kurdish faction related to the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey, a terrorist group with Marxist-Leninist origins that has ambitions to hive off part of South-Eastern Turkey to create a greater Kurdistan. With the IS threatening to overrun Kobani, as many as 190,000 Kurdish refugees (UNHCR figure, Oct 21) fled across the border into Turkey. Turkey was already sheltering over one million Syrian refugees, about 1000 times more than Canada is, at a cost of \$3 billion (International Crisis Group, 2014).

Pressure by Turkey’s Kurds, who comprise about 15-20 percent of the Turkish population, and by Turkey’s allies has mounted on the Turkish government to relieve Kobani by sending ground forces into Syria, providing arms to the Kurds in Kobani and permitting the use of Turkish bases to air-drop weapons and supplies to them, and allowing the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) fighters into Syria to help their Kobani relatives. This time the Turks demurred, although they did allow a contingent of 150 heavily armed Iraqi Peshmerga fighters from the Kurdistan Regional Government of Northern Iraq to convoy through Turkey into Kobani. The Turks fear that sooner rather than later the Syrian Kurds, who have made no secret of their ambitions for a greater Kurdistan derived in part from Turkey, will turn the guns on Turkey. Meanwhile, on-going peace talks between separatist Kurds and the Turkish authorities that were to bring to a political end the 30-year insurgency that has cost upwards of 30,000 lives are in

jeopardy. Turkish military clashes with the PKK in eastern Turkey have picked up and three off-duty Turkish soldiers were shot dead in the street this past week, schools were burned and scores have died in rioting. The IS, for its part, has also made clear its capacity to wreak terrorist havoc in Turkish cities if provoked.

One suspects that like the West during the Iraq-Iran war, the Turks are not inclined to hurry to intervene in Kobani to prevent their enemies from killing each other. Furthermore, many Turks apparently fear Kobani is a trap set to drag Turkey into a war with Syria, thereby weakening Turkey and putting it at risk of breakup. Conspiracies are not always imaginary in the Middle East; the infamous Sykes-Picot Treaty of 1915, which was concluded secretly by France and Britain to dismember the Ottoman Empire, is seared into Turkish consciousness. Last, and most important, the Turks believe that degrading the IS while necessary will not bring the slaughter to an end, that a larger strategy is needed and that the principal goal for the coalition has to be the end of the Assad regime, which has already triggered the deaths of 200,000 people and the flight of millions. The Turks will not go it alone, however, and no other government, Western or Arab, has shown any stomach for such a fight.

And so the West and its principal regional ally Turkey are once again at odds and Western critics inside governments and out are giving vent to their frustrations with what they perceive as Turkish obstinacy. These critics would do well to ask themselves, nonetheless, how their own countries' humanitarian records in this conflict stack up with Turkey's. They should ask themselves as well whether the Turkish concerns for their own security are not legitimate and whether it is fair to criticize them for not intervening on the ground in Kobani while their allies are so determined to keep their own troops on the sidelines, and so unwilling to lift a finger against Assad.