

A no-fly zone for Northeast Syria is crucial

by Rebwar Rashed - 07/01/2019 01:05



It will soon be eight years since the first non-violent demonstrations against the tyranny of Bashar Al Assad started in February of 2011. Turkish and Iranian interventions paved the way for a civil war, which started months later and which has not yet ended. The Syrian people simply wanted a democratic country and a peaceful life. However, Iran and Turkey, the leaders of sectarian war and Islamic fascism, were quick to use Syria for their own national interests.

Iran chose to continue to support the Ba'athist state, while Turkey chose to organize, support, and lead various Islamic terrorist proxies under different names. Both Turkey and Iran have the same goal Syria as they successfully achieved in Iraq— making the country economically and politically dependent. Today, Iran exerts significant political influence in Iraq. Iraq is flooded with cheap manufactured Iranian and Turkish goods, and ongoing conflict in Iraq, Syria and Kurdistan brings billions of dollars in revenue to Turkey. Erdogan enjoys significant international support in this project He used \$500 million from Obama administration and billions of dollars from the E.U., plus substantial NATO support, to invest in the project of organizing radical Islam in

Syria.

In contrast to this, the diverse peoples of North Syria and Rojava have managed to build a democratic society, which, while not perfect, is functioning well. The autonomous administration provides the services which are needed, and gives people stability in the midst of the nearly decade-long civil war. The situation there could be much better, were there not significant outside threats from Turkey and Iran.

It is clear that the war against ISIS and other Islamist terrorist proxies would have been more difficult to win without international support. To be able to preserve and to develop the democratic autonomous administration that exists in Northeast Syria today, that same international support is needed. The current administration is a secular, pluralistic, and democratic project. This project should not be limited only to marginalizing ISIS, as U.S. President Donald Trump has suggested. Rather, the project must strategically emphasize on eliminating ISIS: preventing a resurgence or rebranding, and eradicating the ideology that enables ISIS and groups like it to exist. The peoples of Northeast Syria have begun such a project. In the face of Turkish threats, they need international support to continue.

Such support can start with a no-fly zone. With international protection, a stable administration with a democratic vision for a large part of Syria will push the central government to engage in serious dialogue and reforms, including transition of power. At the same time, a no-fly zone gives an opportunity for secular and democratic opposition to emerge in a natural patriotic way. Here are several reasons why a no-fly zone is essential.

First, it is important not only to stop Erdogan from occupying more of Syria, but also to demand that Turkey leave Syria altogether. Turkey's expansionist ambitions must be stopped before it harms the whole region. It is important to understand Erdogan's notion of "rebuilding the old Ottoman Empire" and "liberating" Jerusalem.

Second, it is also important to see Erdogan's fight against Kurdish people from a wider perspective, as it is not only limited to Syria. Iran and Turkey have been successful in weakening the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Turkey has established dozens of military bases in KRG-controlled areas. The aim is to take over former Ottoman lands in Iraq. The fight against the PKK is only a pretext—the Turkish incursions into the KRG target civilians so regularly that human rights monitors consider them to violate the laws of war.

Third, Erdogan knows that the only way for Turkey to rebuild the Ottoman Empire is through a takeover of all Kurdish lands. This is not a new policy— during the past 90 years, Turkey has seen the existence of the Kurdish people, no matter where they

live, as a threat to its national security. Any 'buffer zone' in Syria and Iraq for Turkey will eventually be annexed, despite international criticism. Cyprus and Bamarni show that Turkey does not respect international agreements that call for it to cede territory it has taken by force. Again, the PKK is only a pretext. If Turkey does not have an expansionist agenda, it can build its "buffer zone" inside its own territory.

Fourth, NATO, the United States, and the E.U. must take their share of responsibility. These actors must recognize that the current political experiment in Rojava is the only workable and functional option for democracy in Syria, given the prevalence of extremist ideology among other 'opposition' groups.

Finally, by stopping Erdogan's expansionist agenda, Turkey will eventually open doors for political negotiation with the PKK. The Kurdish issue in Turkey is the central component of the Turkey-Syria war. A peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish question will change Turkey's political and military strategy in Syria. NATO, the U.S., and the E.U. can contribute greatly to such a solution by shifting from offering Turkey military support to encouraging Turkish officials to negotiate for peace. Stopping an invasion of northeast Syria is an important step for those states interested in building a path to regional peace.

Protecting northeast Syria using the model implemented for Iraqi Kurds in April of 1991 gives the peoples of the region a new chance at stability and security— and benefits all who want peace, stability and democracy in Syria, Turkey and the Middle East.