

Hard decision in Afrin: Will the U.S. choose Turkey over Syria's Kurds?

by Gokcan Aydogan - 17/02/2018 12:40



Turkey's historical hatred towards the Kurds

Since the foundation of modern Turkey in 1923 with Ataturk as president, the Turkish Government has insisted that only Turks live in the country. Since then, the most significant non-Turkish minority, the Kurds (14.5 million), has practically had to make the choice of either renouncing their identity or calling themselves “Mountain Turks”. Whenever the Kurds renounced this situation of systematic erasure, either peacefully or with arms, the Turkish Republic declared them to be “undermining the Republic.” Today they are simply called terrorists.

Just two years after the foundation of the Turkish state, in 1925, an uprising for an independent Kurdistan was led by a religious leader called Shaikh Said. It was put down quickly. While Said and 36 of his followers were executed, they still paved the way for the large-scale Kurdish revolts that shook the country in the southeastern provinces of Ararat and Dersim in 1930 and 1937 respectively. These uprisings were

too, met with the iron fist of the state.

In the aftermath of the Dersim rebellion of 1937, The British consul at Trabzon - the diplomatic post closest to Dersim - spoke of brutal and indiscriminate violence and made an explicit comparison with the Armenian massacres of 1915. "Thousands of Kurds," he wrote, "including women and children, were slain; others, mostly children, were thrown into the Euphrates River. Thousands of others in less hostile areas, who had first been deprived of their cattle and other belongings, were deported to provinces in Central Anatolia."

Kurds have accused the government's successive attempts of suppressing their identity, through such means as the banning of the Kurdish language in society, education, print and media, as efforts to deny their existence. Ataturk believed the unity and stability of a country lay in unitary political identity, relegating cultural and ethnic distinctions to the private sphere. "Happy is he who calls himself a Turk" the adage of the state used to go, and if you did not want to, then you would have to keep that to yourself.

However, many Kurds did not relinquish their identities and language, which only led to the deepening of their legacy of resistance. Today, in Turkey this has been embodied to many Kurds within the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which was formed in 1978 to advocate for Kurdish self-determination.

A large-scale armed conflict between Turkey's armed forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) occurred throughout the 1980s and 1990s, leaving over 35,000 dead. Things only started to get worse before they seemed to slightly get better.

Recent moves by the Turkish government, after almost 100 years of insurgency, have provided Kurds with limited rights and freedoms, particularly in regards to the Kurdish language, education, and media.

However, Kurdish politicians and activists still face pressure.

The government has arrested 11 Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) deputies, including the party's co-chairs Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, 1473 members of HDP and Democratic Regions Party (DBP) and also has seized the administration of 63 municipalities since a failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016. The HDP and DBP are criminalized, precisely because they are seen as being "pro-Kurdish." Although Erdogan has branded himself as a reformer, the Kemalist roots of the Turkish state are still fully intact.

And so it is no surprise then why Turkey's President Erdogan has his eyes set on

Syria's Kurds. Erdogan takes Ataturk's view to its logical conclusion: there can not be an autonomous Kurdistan in Turkey and never one close to Turkey's border. He fears that the successful political experiment in northern Syria could help embolden the cause of Kurds within Turkey.

Kurdish renaissance

In northern Syria, also known as Rojava, the People's Protection Units (YPG) came to life in 2011. The Kurdish YPG allied with Arab, Assyrian, Turkmen, Christian, Armenian and Yazidi populations in order to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is the alliance that, with the support of the U.S. but against the will of Ankara, has been fighting against the Islamic State with considerable success. It was the SDF, for example, which dislodged IS from its symbolic capital in Raqqa.

Afrin, one of the three autonomous cantons in Rojava, has been under control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the YPG since 2012. It lies on the border with Turkey like other two cantons of Rojava. Erdogan and the ruling establishment of the Turkish republic find this troubling.

The current situation

On January 20th, Erdogan announced an offensive against Afrin. He claimed to be attacking after the United States made explicit that they will train fighters to set up a border force that could help neutralize a threat by IS. Many of those fighters, the United States promised, would include their Kurdish partners on the ground. This infuriated Erdogan.

But Erdogan had already planned an attack on Afrin months prior, and said so explicitly. The plan was in the making for months, the border-force, depending on who you ask, was either a trigger to speed up the process or a convenient excuse.

Now, it is the third week of indiscriminate artillery attacks and aerial strikes in Afrin, which have already caused a huge number of civilian deaths. There are two military characteristics of the attacks on Afrin. The first is an aerial campaign waged by the Turkish Air Force. The second is a ground invasion by the Turkish Armed forces, which is being aided by the jihadist wing of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). On Sunday, January 21st, Turkish ground troops entered Afrin with, in their own words, 25000 fighters from the 'Free Syrian Army' trained by Ankara.

Turkey calls it 'Operation Olive Branch', which claims to seek the “liberation” of the Kurdish enclave "from terrorists". Notwithstanding the name of the operation though, in its third week Turkey's offensive into Afrin has led to civilian deaths, torture, the destruction of historical heritage, video footage of a mutilated fighter of the Women's Protection Units (YPJ) and various propaganda videos released by FSA militants calling for a "Jihad" in Afrin and death to the "atheist Kurdish pigs".

Erdogan hoped the offensive would be brief. Turkey's Army and allied Free Syrian Army (FSA) militias, however, have struggled thus far to gain military ground in Afrin. So, it is possible that Operation Olive Branch will take longer than expected, that is, if it does not fail entirely.

Expandability of freedom of expression

Erdogan has criticized opponents of the military intervention, particularly inside the country, as 'traitors and terror sympathizers'.

Turkey's authorities have cautioned all dissidents not to protest, a warning which is especially directed against members of the opposition party, HDP.

As the authorities put it themselves, if people turned up to demonstrations, then the security forces will act “immediately” and “severely”.

Turkey has also ordered the arrest of 31 people, including the co-leader of HDP over opposition to the military's offensive in Syria.

Since the launch of Operation Olive Branch, more than 600 people have been detained for protests or social media posts against the offensive.

The world is watching

Even though the YPG has contributed the most to virtually eliminating the IS in Syria, the international reaction against the operation in Afrin is rather chilling.

The European Union is absolutely silent because of its arms deals with Erdogan, investments in Turkey and the refugee deal. The refugee deal entails that Turkey take in most of the refugees in our current global refugee crisis, in exchange for aid, and influence on the region. Turkey, in other words, uses its refugee population as leverage against Europe.

And as for Russia, it has already made a secret agreement with Turkey in Syria:

Turkey can take its course in Afrin and the surrounding areas in exchange for Moscow and Damascus winning the power to suppress the opposition against Assad in southern Syria successfully.

The airspace of Afrin is under the control of Russia.

Idlib is under the control of Jihadist groups that are supported by Turkey.

Thus, Erdogan is exchanging his jihadist groups' last stronghold with an operation to attack Afrin.

And the U.S.? Reasons behind the silence

The Kurds themselves have asked the US-led coalition to take action against Turkey's Afrin offensive.

But the U.S wonders why it should.

Washington does not need the YPG as it did before. The Islamic State in Syria has almost been defeated. Washington also does not want to spoil its already tense relations with Ankara. Most importantly though, Washington wants to see the SDF being taught a lesson for ideological reasons.

The political system of Rojava can be followed in its constitution, the "Charter of the Social Contract". The constitution provides that all residents shall enjoy the fundamental right of gender equality and freedom of religion. It also provides for property rights.

Abdullah Ocalan, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader imprisoned in Turkey's Imrali, has been taken up as the iconic leader in Rojava whose ideas shaped the region's society and politics. In prison, Ocalan wrote about social ecology, direct democracy, and libertarian municipalism, a confederation of local citizens' assemblies. In March 2005, Ocalan issued his "*Declaration of Democratic Confederalism in Kurdistan*" calling upon citizens "to create municipal assemblies, which he called 'democracy without the state'".

Ocalan envisioned these assemblies as forming a confederation, united for the purposes of self-defence and enshrined with the values of anti-capitalism, environmentalism, gender equality, and ethnic, cultural, and religious pluralism.

The U.S. has not openly confronted the ideology behind the most efficient force in the

fight against the Islamic State. And partially because they felt that they have not had to, insofar as Syrian Kurds made up a vast majority of those fighting against IS.

However, the U.S also never hid its discomfort and confusion.

When the SDF defeated IS, the Syrian Democratic Forces celebrated with a huge banner of Abdullah Ocalan. The United States went on record to publicly condemn this act. "The coalition does not approve of the display of divisive symbols and imagery at a time in which we remain focused on the defeat of Daesh (IS) in Syria" coalition spokesperson Colonel Ryan Dillon, said in response to the act. The U.S embassy in Turkey was more straightforward, "he should not be celebrated" they wrote in a statement.

Uncomfortable the United States may have been, but they never had an opportunity to intervene.

By staying silent on Turkey's Afrin attacks, the United States has seized a unique opportunity to take a stand against the ideology of Rojava. By that, they indirectly give the SDF a message which can be understood as something along the lines of the following: "we appreciate your efforts in the fight against IS; however, there is one thing we hate more than radical Islamism, and it is socialism. So, either abandon your leader and ideology or we "might" forget that we are allies."

Turkey's offensive against the Kurds in Afrin has not been condemned. The statement by the U.S. State Department, on the contrary, states: "We continue to support Turkey, our ally within NATO and an important partner in the fight against the Islamic State."

Afrin is just the beginning

According to the latest reports, Erdogan no longer wants to limit the so-called "Operation Olive Branch" just within the confines of Afrin and its surrounding areas. Rather, Erdogan wants to strip all land controlled by the Kurds in Syria.

Inconveniently, American bases of the anti-IS coalition stand in his way. Indeed, it is still plausible and not a fantasy, that troops from Turkey and the U.S., both NATO allies, could come face to face. The question is how Washington would respond if Turkey advances towards territory it claims to be protecting.

Soon, the U.S. will have a difficult choice to make. Either it will have to stand with an out of control dictator, or it will have to "tolerate" the socialist SDF, which proposes the only reliable social program for establishing peace in Syria and arguably the

broader Middle East.