

Turkey and the Kurds Need An Antwerp Agreement

Monday, August 10, 2015

By Stanley A. Weiss

LONDON--Exactly 95 years ago, the Ottoman Empire came to an end. On August 10, 1920, the Ottomans and the Allied powers signed the Treaty of Sèvres, partitioning the Middle East between European nations. Palestine and Iraq went to the British, who also maintained influence in the kingdom that would become Saudi Arabia. The French were granted Lebanon and Syria. Italy claimed large swaths of Turkey. In a nod to President Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination, the Kurds--largely Sunni Muslims but an ethnically distinct minority--were set to receive their long dreamed-of homeland, an independent Kurdistan.

Ironically, as many historians have noted, the treaty was signed in Sèvres' famed porcelain factory--a remarkably poor symbol for an unbreakable agreement. Indeed, the ink on the treaty was barely dry before an ambitious young Turkish soldier named Mustafa Kemal (later Ataturk) launched a war of independence and built the modern state of Turkey on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, swallowing up the Kurds' promised land in the process.

For the following century, Turkey has alternately ignored and assaulted its Kurdish population, dismissing them as "mountain Turks who have forgotten their language" even as they engaged in an ongoing 30-year guerilla conflict with the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) that has claimed more than 40,000 lives. The remainder of the world's 30 million Kurds--the largest ethnic group without a homeland--have stayed clustered and at the corners of Syria, Iran, and Iraq, where battling endless persecution has made the Kurds' peshmerga fighters the West's most effective allies against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

So when Turkey officially entered the war against ISIS--agreeing several weeks ago to let the U.S. launch airstrikes from the Turkish bases of Incirlik and Diyarbakir and to cooperate with several Syrian rebel groups--it was only a matter of time before the Kurds once again found themselves in the crosshairs.

To hear Turkey's brilliant but two-faced President Recep Tayyip Erdogan tell it, Turkey came off the sidelines due to an ISIS suicide bombing at a Turkish cultural center that killed 32 young Kurdish activists and wounded 100 more. As Erdogan ally and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu insisted in a recent Washington Post oped,

"Turkey has been fully committed to the fight against Daesh [ISIS] since this monstrous organization first reared its ugly head."

But this is merely, as a recent Foreign Affairs headline calls it, "Turkey's Cover." Erdogan, notes the New York Times, appears "more interested in smashing his Kurdish opponents than he is in defeating the Islamic State extremists in Syria and Iraq." After all, when ISIS launched a massive assault on the Syrian town of Kobani, just across the Turkish border, Turkish tanks massed on the border--yet did nothing. Turkey's very first airstrikes sent one sortie to attack ISIS in Syria, compared to 150 sorties against Kurdish targets. In the past several weeks, Turkey has arrested nearly 1,000 suspected terrorists. Of these, 137 are alleged ISIS members; 847 are PKK fighters.

Though Erdogan is an avowed enemy of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, his biggest fear is that Kurdish militants in Syria--loosely allied with the PKK--will be too successful against Assad, carving out their own country in northern Syria and potentially giving the landlocked but oil-rich Kurds a corridor to the Mediterranean Sea. After Kurdish rebels captured the strategic Syrian town of Tal Abyad, a pro-Erdogan newspaper ran the hysterical headline, "The P.Y.D. is more dangerous than ISIS." It is for this reason that Erdogan received, in exchange for use of the two Turkish bases, tacit American support for a no-fly zone in northern Syria--which he hopes will keep the Kurds as well as ISIS away from Turkey's border.

The paradox is that, until this most recent outbreak of violence, Erdogan had spearheaded a rapprochement with Turkey's Kurds. For three years, his government had engaged in peace talks with the PKK--coming tantalizingly close to a deal--in the midst of a largely successful two-year ceasefire. The government even relaxed longstanding bans on speaking or broadcasting in Kurdish. In return, Erdogan's pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) enjoyed substantial support from Turkey's Kurds. As recently as March of 2015, Erdogan told a crowd in the southeastern city of Gaziantep, "Are you ready for a decisive settlement [to the Kurdish question?] Then, brothers, give us 400 deputies and let this issue be resolved peacefully."

What changed? During the June 7th parliamentary elections, Turkey's Kurds abandoned Erdogan and the AKP in droves and flocked to the new Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). With 13 percent of the vote, the HDP gave the Kurds their very first representation in Turkey's Parliament while offering what Turkish analyst Sina Ulgen calls "an opportunity to overhaul Turkey's political culture and inch the country toward becoming a genuinely liberal democracy." It also denied the increasingly authoritarian Erdogan the majority he desperately desired--analysts called it a "resounding rebuke"--to overhaul the country's constitution and grant himself still greater executive power.

Hence the bombing. "Erdogan's strongman image is being restored with the strikes," observes Soner Cagaptay, director of the Washington Institute's Turkish Research Program. By portraying himself as a wartime leader and inflaming tensions with the Kurds, Erdogan may be able to call a new election and win his majority a second time around. "One cannot help but think that part of Erdogan's calculus is galvanizing the nationalist vote before a possible early election," says the columnist Asli Aydintasbas.

Having worked hard to coax Turkey into the fight--their participation was hailed as a "game-changer" by American military officials--the U.S. has been shamefully reluctant to criticize Turkey's brazen attacks on Kurdish encampments.

But the choice is clear: On one side is a megalomaniacal leader who builds 1,000-room palaces for himself, routinely imprisons more journalists than any country in the world, and whose government, as Suruc survivor Fatma Edemen says, "has let ISIS roam freely in Turkey for years." On the other is a pro-American, pro-Israel Kurdish minority that has, despite millennia of persecution, established a thriving democracy in the middle of war-torn Iraq--and whose fierce fighters Secretary of Defense Ash Carter has called "the model of what we're trying to achieve" in the battle against ISIS. As Reuters succinctly puts it, "The U.S. picked the wrong ally in the fight against Islamic State."

In the short term, the American agreement with Turkey may bring U.S. drones and bombers a thousand miles closer to ISIS targets. But in the long run, it sets the Kurds back yet again in their dream of independence. As they say in the Arabian peninsula, one should not drink poison to quench a thirst.

Given all this, what should the U.S. do?

First, the U.S. should take the PKK off our terror list. We must make it clear to Erdogan that no strikes against the Kurds will be tolerated--threatening, if necessary, to deprive Turkey of NATO cooperation and to end our support for a northern Syria buffer zone.

Second, Washington should actively work to bring Erdogan and the PKK back to the negotiating table. "Erdogan came within a whisker of striking a grand peace deal with the Kurds," Newsweek's Owen Matthews notes. Now that Turkey's Kurds make up a sizeable minority of Parliament, why not take the opportunity to end the brutal civil war once and for all?

Third, arm the Iraqi peshmerga directly and recognize an independent Kurdistan. Fighting for a legitimate country of their own will only serve to further motivate America's most effective allies against ISIS. And after years of nation-building in Iraq, we would have actually created a democratic oasis in the Middle East.

For nearly a century now, the sharp shards of Sèvres have deeply scarred the region. Kurdistan's time has come. Only this time, sign the agreement in Antwerp--a city known for diamonds, the most unbreakable substance on Earth.