

Turkey Struggling with Shifting Plans in Syria

By Judy Bello 21 October 2014

President Erdogan of Turkey has, under extreme US pressure, allowed Iraqi Kurds into Syria to fight with the PYD (Syrian Kurds) for the city of Kobane. The international press has been following the desperate fight in Kobane with intense interest for the last few weeks, though most of the population has abandoned the city some time ago. While the fate of Syrian Christians, Alawites and Druze, among other minorities attacked by militant Syrian and non-Syrian groups over the last 3 years in many Syrian cities including Sweida, Homs, Damascus, Aleppo and many more has largely been ignored by the international press, the Kurds fight against bloodthirsty bigots for their city is big news. It is a propaganda feast, with women fighters and endless losses and reprieves; a desperate battle fought in the watchful, but not helpful, presence of the Turkish military a mile or so away.

The US is now bombing to assist the embattled Kurds in Kobane. This is presented as evidence of 'compassion' and an alliance of sorts with the Kurds. There is an element of truth to the latter, but it is a shallow explanation. Only a few days before the bombing began, John Kerry gave a speech wherein he stated that although our sympathies are with the Kurds in Kobane, it is just one town among many. He said that the United States needs to go after strategic targets to get ISIS. And now we are bombing them in Kobane. There might be a strategic advantage to drawing the fighters out in Kobane, and supporting the Kurds to hang on. It makes good anti-ISIS propaganda. And, it is a way of collecting some fighters under our strikes, where bombing around their base in Al-Raqqa was problematic as the fighters had melted into the civilian population, and civilian deaths were becoming an embarrassment in the land of 'Assad the monster'.

That said, the current strategy is a torment for Turkish President Erdogan, and undermines his position, which has put Turkey in a compromised position with regard to the foreign fighters. At the same time, the US strategy of support for the Kurdish fighters in Kobane is also at odds with Turkish policy for managing the Kurds, who comprise a minority of more than 20% of the Turkish population, and lay claim to nearly 1/3 of the Turkish territory. For a century, Turkish governments have been trying to erase the Kurds from their population. Over the last decades, militant Kurdish freedom fighters have been a serious problem for Turkey. Unlike the Iraqi Kurds who inhabit their ancestral lands, many of the Kurds in Syria came there as refugees from Turkey. Although the Erdogan government has been working on peace and reconciliation with the Kurds, the last thing they want is an independent Kurdistan in Syria allied with the militant forces in southern Turkey.

Worse, Turkey is flooded with FSA, ISIS and Al-Nusra fighters. Erdogan initially refused to join the US program against ISIS (and maybe some day Assad), He demanded a no-fly-zone across northern Syria and a new US commitment to 'take out' the Assad government, a demand which has not been approved. Finally, after 'negotiations' with the Americans, he has agreed to allow US forces to vet, train and arm more Syrian ground forces in Turkey. There are many reasons why the US sees a no-fly-zone is a dubious plan at present, and it has been set aside for a future date by US decision makers. But, for Turkey, it is a survival issue. As distressing as US support for the Kurds is to Turkey, there is a second issue. With numerous ISIS fighters in Turkey, they are already threatening to turn on their facilitators. If Turkey were to openly attack ISIS in Syria, they are well positioned to retaliate in Turkey.

Erdogan made a major investment in the Syrian insurgency, and a US stance that appeared to ensure a quick and clean victory. With this end becoming more remote every day, Turkey is overextended and I believe lacking a viable exit from a very challenging situation. Erdogan has been supporting ISIS along with other Syrian and Al-Qaeda factions fighting in Syria from the

beginning of the so called Civil War there. I'm not going to call it a civil war again, and if you question that, take a look at [this map](#) published in the Washington Post. on October 11, where they show a map of the flow of 15,000 fighters flowing into Syria from more than 80 nations, hardly the foot soldiers of a civil war. Most of these fighters have entered Syria through Turkey. On the map they show those coming from the North coming through Turkey, but the costs are escalating. Yesterday, [Press TV correspondent, Serena Shim was killed in a car crash](#) in Turkey shortly after being threatened by members of Turkish Intelligence.

The Kurdish city, Kobane, Ayn Al-Arab, to the local Arabs, is not the only border town that has been under siege, nor is the battle in Kobane new. ISIS has been attacking the Kurds for more than a year now. In June, [ISIS kidnapped over 100 Kurdish students](#) on their way home from exams. [The Armenian town of Kasab](#), on the Turkish border in the westernmost part of Syria, was overrun by Al-Nusra fighters earlier this year, for months. There are photos online of the men gathered triumphantly under their flag in what is clearly the border crossing checkpoint. Most of the population Kasab fled, and many returned when the town was liberated around the same time as ISIS capture of Mosul, Iraq. [But I am told by a local resident](#) that sporadic shelling continues from the Turkish side of the border. Many other border towns are swamped with ISIS, Al-Nusra and FSA fighters of various colors.

[Turkey has opened its borders and its airports and its cities and hospitals, including ISIS](#), to the various organizations of the Syrian opposition. The Syrian National Coalition, chosen by the foreign opponents of the Assad Government to rule Syria in their place, is based in Turkey. The Syrian Liberation Army, now the Martyrs' Brigade, based in Idlib, who were one of the earliest militias to emerge in Syria, were trained in Turkey, and their families relocated to a Turkish refugee camp for safekeeping before their first attack. [The CIA has used Incirlik base in Turkey to organize, supply, train and communicate with Syrian anti-government forces since 2011](#). Members of ISIS and Al-Nusra Front, the Al-Qaeda organization in Syria, are treated in Syrian hospitals and welcomed as guests in the country. See below for a video of ISIS members on a Tram in Istanbul. As you can see, the other people on the train, as well as the ISIS fighters are completely at ease. There is no hint that this is an unusual event. Following that, there is a video of FSA fighters shipping dismantled factories from Aleppo across the border into Turkey, whence, the text on Youtube says they will be shipped to Qatar.

The no-fly-zone demanded by Turkish President Erdogan would kill two birds with one stone. It would essentially move the border south into Syria, and provide a buffer zone into which they could hope to move the fighters now inside Turkey and manning Turkish border crossings. Resources could be provided for them in the buffer zone, [as Israel is doing in the Golan](#), away from the Turkish homeland. At the same time, the Syrian Kurds would be driven further south into Syria, or into Iraqi Kurdistan, while Turkish Kurds would be restrained, as they are now, from crossing the border to join them. Iraqi and Syrian Kurds are already cooperating across the border, though they do not have a history of doing so.

--

Judith Bello