

Why Syrian Kurdistan Matters

An *Israel News Talk Radio* discussion with Ken Timmerman

by Jerry Gordon and Rod Bryant (March 2018)



On January 15, 2018, the US-led coalition against the Islamic State announced a new role for the Kurdish-led YPG/YPJ Syrian Democratic Force (SDF): the formation of a Syrian Border Force (SBF) to protect the Turkish and Iraqi borders. The purpose was to protect Eastern Syria, which the mixed Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian Christian force had liberated in hard-fought battles in Kobani, Manbij, Raqqa and the oil and gas fields of Deir ez Zor. The announcement was viewed by Turkey as a provocative act by the US coalition, with Turkish President Erdogan calling it a “terrorist army” because of YPG/YPJ’s affiliation with the Turkish Kurdish Workers Party

(PKK), designated as a terrorist group by Turkey, the EU and US. This was further exacerbated US Secretary of State Tillerson positing that the US would not withdraw its 2,000 special forces and Marine units from Syria until there was a political resolution of the Syrian civil war. In the interim, the proposed SBF of 30,000, drawn from the SDF units, would engage in post Islamic State stabilization of liberated areas.

Erdogan began mobilizing Turkish and Islamist Militia Free Syrian Army fighters across the border in Hatay Province from the largely Kurdish Afrin Enclave of the Syrian Aleppo Governorate in the Kurd Dagh or Kurdish Mountains. The bucolic area held several ancient monuments, including the Ain Darra Hittite Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the Biblical Shrine of Uriah the Hittite, a captain in King David's army. There are an estimated 100,000 Kurds in Afrin that had been historically settled by them during the Seleucid period. Because of the seven-year Syrian Civil War more than 316,000 internally displaced Kurds, Yazidis, Arabs and Turkmen found refuge in Afrin. Independent YPG/YPJ fighters who were not part of the SDF were stationed in Afrin. Approximately 500 Russian troops were stationed in Afrin City purportedly to protect against a Turkish incursion.

Erdogan issued a demarche on January 18, 2018 requesting the immediate withdrawal of the small force of 200 US special operators deployed in Manbij in preparation for an invasion of Afrin. Turkey had invaded Jarablus, Syria shortly following his staged coup in July 2016 with a mixed Jihadist militia composed of former al-Nusra and ISIS fighters that adopted the name of the failed US trained Free Syrian Army. The US contingent at Manbij had provided protection for the SDF units that had engaged the mixed FSA/Turkish invasion force blocking it from crossing the Euphrates into the Kurdish heartland of

Rojava, or Western Kurdistan. The YPG and PYD liberation of Rojava created a model government structure of locally elected councils and parties that was a confessional model as it encompassed Christian Armenians, Assyrians, Sunni Arabs, Yazidis and Turkmen. Turkey, a charter member of NATO in 1952, presented a conundrum to both the US, a founding NATO member and the NATO council. While it nominally was a member of the US-led coalition of 74 countries fighting the Islamic State, the Islamist Erdogan regime had provided a gateway for entry of foreign Islamic State fighters into Syria and Erdogan's family profited in the sale of oil from Islamic State-controlled wells in Eastern Syria.

On January 19, 2017, Russian troops evacuated Afrin City in advance of the Turkish and Islamist FSA invasion. January 20th dawned with cross border artillery shelling, rocket, mortar and air attacks by US supplied Turkish F-16s randomly hitting civilian and YPG strongpoints in Afrin. Turkish tanks and troop carriers invaded eastern villages of Afrin. Stiff resistance was put up by YPG forces and inevitably casualties mounted on both sides. The ancient Ain Dara Hittite Temple, allegedly a model for King Solomon's Temple, was bombed by Turkish jets destroying most of it. There were reports of the mutilation of dead YPG and women YPJ fighters by the FSA Islamist militia, evidence of violation of the Law of Wars and Geneva Conventions. US Central Command General Joseph Votel informed Erdogan that the US was not going to move US special operators from Manbij. Besides US concerns, there were demarches issued by the Assad regime, French Foreign Minister Le Deraing, and the EU council requesting Turkey to withdraw. US concerns were raised over reports that hundreds of SDF fighters from Kurdish, Assyrian and Syriac units in Eastern Syria were streaming to Afrin to join the YPG/YPJ forces. Erdogan accused the US of sending "thousands" of trucks filled with ammunition and war materiel to the front in Afrin.



Ken Timmerman

Against this background, the *Israel National Talk Radio–Beyond the Matrix* hosts Rod Bryant and *New English Review* Senior Editor Jerry Gordon held discussions with intrepid journalist and *New York Times* bestselling author Kenneth R. Timmerman. The issues covered include the conflict with Turkey in Syria, the debacle that befell the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government following an independence referendum, and emergence of a model democratic political system in Syrian Kurdish Rojava as an exemplar for the other Kurdish regions in Iraq and Iran. Timmerman was in the midst of finalizing a new book, *ISIS Begins* about the conflict with the Kurds.

Rod Bryant: You are listening to *Beyond the Matrix on Israel News Talk Radio*. I am your host Rod Bryant. Thank you so much for tuning in. As you know we have been on a several week-long expose on the issue of Turkey, Syria and the Kurds. Along with me is my co-host, Jerry Gordon. Jerry, we are going to get down to business as we have a lot to cover. On previous programs in this series on the Kurds, we have called several things that happened. I think that you and I were among the few non-Kurdish people talking about it. We both noticed that there is virtually a media blackout when it comes to anything to do with the Kurds. It's a little disturbing. We batted around the idea that either the United States is fully engaged in the defense of the Kurds and doesn't want to make a big show of it or it was hoping that it would just disappear by ignoring it. Has something changed?

Jerry Gordon: One of the things that has occurred was

Commander of the US Central Command General Joseph Votel basically drawing a red line for President Erdogan of Turkey that the U.S. was not going to roll over and withdraw its troops in Manbij. They have been in Manbij for over a year and a half when they stopped the Turks from crossing the Euphrates River into the Kurdish heartland, so it seems to have communicated a message. The question is, how robust that message is going to be?

Bryant: Absolutely. And, (it's) something that we are going to try to answer with our guest Kenneth R. Timmerman. He is going to give us some insights. He is an author and writer for *FrontPage Magazine*. We are going to be talking about the Kurds and the incursion of Turkey into the Kurdish region in Syria, a very important project. That is why we are putting a magnifying glass on the region of the Kurdish-held areas of Syria, Iraq and Turkey. Our sources are telling us that this is an extreme hotbed and we feel very passionate about it because it is one of few opportunities to help establish a sound Republic. Jerry, would you introduce our guest Ken Timmerman?

Gordon: Kenneth R. Timmerman is a world class *New York Times* bestselling author, expert on Iran and the Kurds. He has interviewed people who Turks call "terrorists" in the Kurdish Turkish Community, the PKK, but who are really not. He is one of the sounder voices in the United States regarding support for the Kurds, and Israel. He is co-founder of the Foundation for Democracy in Iran. He knows about all those protests that we have seen during the past month or so. Ken, the first question I have to pose to you is who are these people called the Kurds and why is their message very important for the United States and in Israel to understand?

Ken Timmerman: Historically, the Kurds are a separate ethnic and cultural group. They speak a different language from the Arabs, the Turks, and the Persians amongst whom they are mingled. They were promised—after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I—their own homeland that would have included territories today inside Iran, Iraq, Turkey, a bit in Armenia, and Syria. Of course, they were not allowed to form that homeland. As soon as the Turkish Republic—the modern Turkish Republic was created in the early 1920s—that was the end of Kurdish nationhood. They are 40 to 50 million—the largest ethnic national group in the world to have national aspirations that have been persistently denied.

Gordon: Who are some of these groups that you hear initials about like PKK or YPG or others like it that you have actually had the ability to access?

Timmerman: I have spent quite a bit of time in Northern Iraq both in the Assyrian Christian homeland in the Nineveh plain which is just outside of Mosul and in the Kurdish areas along the border with Iran, the Qandil mountains. This mountain range separates Iraq and Iran rising to the height of 13,000 to 14,000 feet. In those mountains, the PKK and the Iranian Kurdish Group PJAK has training camps that I have been to and interviewed people. They are within spitting distance of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp based on the mountaintops. They could lob rocks down onto our heads. The Turkish and Iranian Governments claims that the PKK is kind of the Wizard of Oz of Kurdistan. They allege that the PKK control everything and everybody. That is why the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan has been in a Turkish prison cell since 1999. He is so powerful in this Turkish prison cell that he controls

everybody. It must be mind control. He controls the Iranian Kurds, the PJAK, the Syrian Kurds that are called the YPG, the PKK, the Turkish Kurds. My gosh, he must even control half of the Kurdish Regional Government in Northern Iraq. That is what the Turkish Government says. That is what the Iranian Government says. That is what Barack Obama said in February 2009 in one of his first actions as President upon a request from Turkey and Iran to put PJAK, the Iranian Kurds, on the terrorism list at the Treasury Department because they were "a branch" of the PKK.

Not true. I have interviewed their leaders in Qandil in those mountains. Most recently, I have interviewed the newest leader who took over about six months ago. I have interviewed him twice in the past six months, once in Sulaymaniyah in Iraq, Northern Iraq and recently in Brussels, where he came for a conference at the European Parliament. They are sympathetic to the PKK. They share a lot of their ideology but they are not controlled by them. They are a parallel group. They work together but they are not controlled by them. They have separate leadership struggles and everything else so you have in Northern Syria in what the Kurds call Rojava, which means Western Kurdistan, and you have a de facto democratically organized republic on the ground for over the past five years. It is majority Kurdish but Assyrian Christians live there, Armenians live there, Arabs live there, as well. They are all represented in the local government. They have an elected council or parliament and political parties. Therefore, it is a multi-party, multi-ethnic enclave in Northern Syria which is exactly the kind of thing we would like to see emerge in the Middle East.

This is wonderful. It is not perfect and the Kurds themselves don't pretend that it's perfect but, boy, what an improvement over the dictatorships that they have been surrounded with! The Turkish Islamic dictatorship under Erdogan is dead set on

crushing them. Erdogan has said we are going to kill every last one of them and he has warned American troops *if you don't get out of the way we are going to kill you too.*

Gordon: To emphasize that point, we understand from certain sources that last Friday at mosques all throughout Turkey, there was a call for jihad against the Kurds—not just the PKK or anything else but the Kurds.

Timmerman: That's quite amazing. I don't recall the exact percentages of Turkey that is Kurdish. Perhaps ten or fifteen percent of Turkey is made up of Kurds. They are Turkish citizens, so you have mosques in Turkey calling for the massacre of ten to fifteen percent of their own population. I don't know if that's unprecedented since Adolph Hitler. I don't think even Saddam Hussein in the 1988 Al-Anfal genocide, when he massacred several hundred thousand Kurds, called for jihad in mosques in the same way that they are doing it now in Turkey.

Bryant: Ken, I have a question for you. We know that Putin's Russia has actually been involved with the Kurds for a number of decades. What is Putin's game in Syria and the Kurds. Do you think he's serious about trying to find some resolution to the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds?

Timmerman: What I have seen is that Putin has defied expectations through his behavior in Syria. He's on again, off again. He deploys troops, he withdraws them. He deploys the Air Force, he withdraws it. What he seems to want to be is to position himself as the dealmaker, the broker, the power-

player on the ground. Certainly, Russia wants to re-establish, which it has already done with its naval base at Tartus on the Mediterranean. Certainly, they want to control Syrian airspace which means that they also control Israeli incursions into Syrian airspace. That is very important to them. However, I see him more as a power broker, as a king-maker rather than an outright occupier.

Bryant: That's a little comforting but, at the same time, it just looks like there has been a media blackout. We have been on top of this as well as you trying to do as much research as we can on the internet. I'm going to tell you it's sparse and we have sources telling us that the activity that's going on in the region is over the top.

We are trying to find out what was the idea behind the U.S. abandonment of the Iraqi Kurdistan region after the independence referendum in September 2017.

Timmerman: Right. Okay. Let me get to that in just one second. I want to tell you just one more thing about the Kurds, Syria and Russia. The Kurds themselves are hoping that Russia will play a moderating role. The predominantly Kurdish local government in Northern Syria has long had a representative in Moscow. They are talking to the Russians all the time, they are trying to get the Russians to intervene with Turkey, to get them to scale back the attacks and they've had some success. Now, let me go back to your question, which is Iraqi Kurdistan, the KRG or Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. The former President of the Kurdish Regional Government, Masoud Barzani, whose term expired in 2014, resigned in favor of his nephew, Nechirvan. Barzani was warned quite explicitly by the Trump administration on multiple occasions both in public and

in private that if he insisted on holding the referendum on September 25th, bad things would happen.

Barzani persisted with the referendum and bad things happened very quickly. The first bad thing that happened was that the Baghdad government essentially put a *cordon sanitaire* around the northern part of Iraq. They grounded civil aircraft, they would not allow any commercial flights to come in, so they isolated them from the world. Then they retook Kirkuk, the oil producing area with Iraqi Army troops and the Shia Hashd al-Shaabi Popular Mobilization Force which is a 100,000-man force backed by Iran. They moved all throughout Iraqi Kurdistan, checkmating the Peshmerga. Now, here is the problem with all that. Barzani was not an American ally. He turned to Turkey and it was the Turks who were egging him on. Erdogan was egging him on up until two days before the election. One of my Kurdish friends who I was with in Brussels at this EU conference said Erdogan essentially let Barzani down with a rope into the well. Once Barzani was at the bottom of the well two days before the election, he cut off the rope. So the Turks then came in along with the Iranians, who put the squeeze, on the East side if you wish and the Turks are on the left and they just had the Kurds in Northern Iraq in the squeezer. They were getting it from both sides so bad things happened to them after the referendum. The problem with the referendum was that Barzani was not trying to establish a free democratic secular Kurdistan. The problem was that he wanted to establish "Barzanistan". In other words, a one-party state, a dictatorship, and that is not what we needed to see in Northern Iraq.

Bryant: Now we heard some good news come out from Baghdad that Iraq released the sanctions on the banking system for the Kurds.

Timmerman: Yes, I saw that and the U.S. is mediating here pretty intensely because the situation got out of control. You know, the Kurds have gotten used to just going to their airport in Erbil and flying to Vienna or flying here or there and all of the sudden they couldn't fly anywhere. They were literally grounded and it was a very bad situation. Baghdad punished them quite effectively and now the U.S. is trying to put the pieces back together.

Bryant: Well there seems to be a shift going on. I'm not really sure what it is right now because I have not really read into it enough but you know Iraq also sent \$210 million to the KRG for salaries for government employees. This appears to be some loosening don't you think?

Timmerman: Well it is, but you know Iraq is supposed to give them seventeen percent of the state budget every year with the income from oil and everything else.

They haven't given them virtually anything for the past three or four years. So, the Iraqis owe them a lot of back salaries and the share of oil revenues. That's one of the big beefs that the Kurds have had.

Gordon: Ken, I want to return to Rojava. We are now in the midst of this Erdogan war in Afrin and he is making moves towards Manbij where we have two hundred U.S. troops if not more. We don't hear anything out of the Turkish press about Turkish casualties so far and, moreover, there is something else that you have written about which is kind of interesting.

Why is this autonomous region in Northeast Syria modeled for Kurds to use to basically obtain their eventual independence?

Timmerman: For starters, it is more democratic and more cohesive than the KRG in Northern Iraq. They, as I mentioned earlier, include Assyrian Christians, the Arabs, and Armenians—all of whose rights are being respected. The Kurds in Northern Iraq under Barzani were trying to take over, for example, the Nineveh Plain—the traditionally Christian areas of Northern Iraq. They wanted to call the Assyrian Christians, who are of a very distinct ethnic group, Christian Kurds. They really didn't like that. It is like the Turks calling the Kurds "mountain Turks." It is a better model because it is a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional secular government, such as we would just dream of having in the Middle East.

The only other country like that is Israel and Israel is multi-ethnic, multi-confessional, although it is a Jewish state. Rojava is not a Muslim state so it is a secular multi-ethnic, multi-confessional entity.

Bryant: This is why it is so important.

Gordon: One aspect of that are the women who are in the forefront of combat for the YPJ in the war against ISIS. What do they have that the men don't have?

Timmerman: The answer is long knives. I have spent time with the women of the Kurdish guerilla fighters in the Qandil mountains in Iraq. You can see some pictures of that on my website on Kentimmerman.com. You can go back into the archives

and look at my articles from up in the mountains, but it's really something. These girls start training at the age of seventeen or eighteen. They are segregated. I mean they get together but they do not mingle. It is a fighting camp and they go through quite a bit of training—ideological training, political science, history, and sociology. The ones I was talking to were Iranians, so they are sent into Iran to do political recruiting. In Rojava, the recruiting is now done on a village-to-village basis. One of the female activists who I met with recently in Brussels had just spent five years in Northern Syria. She is the co-President of the Kurdish National Congress, this multi-national group that unites Kurdish groups from Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. She said we would go into some of these villages and talk to the sheikh, the Muslim village elder and he would say, you people, you Kurds, you are worse than Daesh, you are worse than the Islamic State. She asked, why is that? He said Daesh would leave us alone and they would let us do to our women whatever we wanted but you are trying to change us and change our way of thinking. She said, yes, we are but we are going to do it slowly.

Bryant: Over the past few years it has been revealed how feared these Kurdish women fighters are by terrorist organizations like the Islamic State. It is the last thing they want to do is to be killed by one of these Kurdish women. Can you explain?

Timmerman: Getting killed by one of the Kurdish women is the next to the last thing that they fear. The first thing that they fear is being captured by them.

Bryant: Captured by them because there is a process of

interrogation that is slightly painful includes a knife.

Timmerman: No, the female fighters are competent. They truly have respect for human rights and respect for the laws of war. You have Turkey that has been bombarding civilian areas in Afrin and you don't see the YPG doing the same thing in Turkey.

They are not launching attacks into Turkey. One of the other things that happened recently, Turkey bombarded with F-16's, a UNESCO historic site the Ain Dara Hittite Temple which is said to resemble in many ways Solomon's Temple, the first temple in Jerusalem. They have destroyed about half of it with their aerial bombings. Nobody is saying a word about that just because it is just like what Al Qaeda destroying the Buddhas at Bayaman in Afghanistan did. Turkey is no better than Al Qaeda or ISIS

Bryant: Gordon and I were talking during the pre-show warm-up about an eighty-year-old farmer being killed in an artillery strike from Turkey into the Kurdish area. This man's son is a doctor who helped to treat U.S. soldiers during combat. It is really a sad ordeal when a human life is not accounted for at all. There is no respect for the law of land warfare with these radical Islamic elements. The only way to deal with this is to get behind this Kurdish government in Northern that needs to be propped up and helped as much as possible. Ken, we really appreciate you coming on this show. I hope that this is not the last time that you will join us. We really appreciate your expert opinion and the research that you have done and if you want to get a hold of Ken Timmerman you can go to, give his website, Kentimmerman.com.

Bryant: Great interview with Timmerman. Jerry, we need to provide some summary. Talking about the Kurds is almost like talking about the different factions in Lebanon twenty-five years ago. We are talking about the necessity for the United States and Israel to provide materiel, financial and political support for the Kurds. We are speaking of the Kurds and Syria and the reason why is because it is a model for a democracy that involves Christians, Muslims, and Kurds. Why don't we take it from there and sort of develop it and then explain the differences between the three Kurdish regions.

Gordon: We heard from Timmerman about groups in Iran and Iraqi Kurdistan who have different allegiances and different ideologies. The Barzani government that he talks about has been around since 1945 and views itself as the vanguard. It became a dictatorship of sorts. There is also another group in Iraqi Kurdistan headed by the Talabani family who was tilted towards not only Iraq but also unfortunately to Iran. That the reason why Kirkuk, with its large oil field, fell to a combination of the Hashd al-Shaabi the Iraqi Shia who were run by a real enemy of the US, General Soleimani who is head of the Iranian Quds Force. So, it is good that the Iraqi government is loosening the controls over the KRG civil aviation and also making sure that it gets its fair share of the oil revenues from Iraq. This is supposed to be approximately 17 to 18 percent.

Bryant: Right now they are only talking about \$210 million.

Gordon: That's correct.

Bryant: This is a fraction of what they are owed.

Gordon: That's correct.

Bryant: They realize that if they don't have considerable forces backing them that could cause upheaval in the region. They don't need that now after ISIS came through.

Gordon: In the case of the Iranian Kurds, the PJAK as it's called, it has been associated with the PKK in Turkey because they are in that northwest mountainous area that abuts Turkey. They have been pretty successful in controlling the night, as we call it, against the Iranian Security Forces and the Revolutionary Guards. They have a base in the Qandil Mountains in Northern Iraq that Turkey regularly bombs. Looking at the Kurds in Syria, we have an interesting situation. We have The Peoples Resistance Force, or YPG,/PYD Party that has sort of a semi-Marxist ideology. Their jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan who is in Turkey was the progenitor of that. Yet, the PKK had been designated a terrorist group. What we have in Rojava, the heartland of the Kurds in Syria, is essentially the beginning of a secular democratic confessional republic which is very significant. There is nothing quite like it in the region and it would be better than, for example, Lebanon which is now controlled by Hezbollah. That is the most important aspect of it and I think it's a reason why the U.S. should own up in terms of the defense of that area. They have been the most valiant fighters. We have heard in discussions with Timmerman about the women who are formidable fighters trained from the age of seventeen on and scared the willies out of ISIS Islamist militias.

Bryant: Well, Jerry, we also have to remember my contention, that the news coming out of the Pentagon in discussions about the Kurds in Syria has been zero. It's my contention that we're there still providing support and military assistance to the Kurds in the region. That's why we are just trying not to say too much about it. I hope I'm right. I think there are indications from our sources that is correct. However, at the same time it would be nice to hear a little bit of public support backing the Syrian Kurds.

Gordon: The declaration that was made by CENTCOM Commander General Joe Votel was important. It certainly bolsters the 200 Special Operators that we know are in the Manbij area. But as Timmerman said, we need to do more.

It's not lost on us that one of the things that the U.S. has secretly done in order to get out of the NATO base at Incirlik, Turkey to adopt the suggestion of U.S. Army Brig. General (ret.) Ernie Audino who was liaison with the Iraqi Peshmerga during the Second Gulf War. He said make use of the seven tactical air fields in Rojava in northeastern Syria to provide tactical air cover support.

Bryant: Right. There is a significant presence of military that is actively operating in Northern Iraq. We know that they are there right now. However, we are not hearing too much out of the Pentagon. It may be it is intentional not wanting to draw attention to it. However at the same time, we have an opportunity to bring light to the Syrian Kurds which is a potential democracy in Northern Syrianother country that might resemble Israel and become a beacon of democracy in the region. Wouldn't it be amazing if democracy and freedom could break out in these regions that

have had nothing but tyrannical governments for centuries and centuries?

Gordon: Absolutely.

Bryant: Thank you for lining up such a good show for our listeners. Shalom.

Gordon: Shalom!

Jerome B Gordon is a Senior Vice President of the *New English Review* and author of [The West Speaks](#) and [Genocide in Sudan: Caliphate Threat to Africa and the World](#). Mr. Gordon is a former US Army intelligence officer who served during the Viet Nam era. He was the co-host and co-producer of weekly The Lisa Benson Show for National Security that aired out of KKNT960 in Phoenix, Arizona from 2013 to 2016. He is co-host and co-producer of the Middle East Round Table periodic series on 1330amWEBY, Northwest Florida Talk Radio, Pensacola, Florida. [Listen](#) to the Israel National Talk Radio–Beyond the Matrix program.

[More](#) by Jerry Gordon.

Help [support](#) New English Review.