

First they came for the...

By Nikos Akritas

Turkey's rebel-backed intervention in Syria is not surprising. Not only has Erdogan been [laying the groundwork for some time](#), Turkey's long-term interests when it comes to the Kurds are a predictable staple of its foreign policy. Kurdish independence movements must not only be suppressed within Turkey but crushed everywhere else. When it comes to the Kurds and Armenians, two groups denied independence when the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist, Turkey's foreign policy has always been proactive.

Although Turkey's own forces have not (yet) extended their direct reach further, its proxies, operating under the umbrella terms Free Syrian Army and Syrian National Army, have. This advances Turkey's influence deeper into Syria and strengthens its number one priority, of crushing Kurdish independence movements inside it. Just as the Armenians on Turkey's eastern border were sent a clear message through Turkey's support for Azerbaijan during the ethnic cleansing of Nagorno-Karabakh, so too must the Kurds be subdued. Despite their dispute being with Azerbaijan, not Turkey, the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh faced Turkey's intervention. Similarly, the Kurds in Syria cannot be allowed to control their own affairs.

Turkey's domestic and foreign policy agenda is to deny any ethnic minority the potential to claim an ancestral link or right to lands the Ottoman Empire never relinquished. Allowing a Kurdish quasi state to exist on its borders poses a direct threat to Turkish power in the region. With approximately 15 million Kurds within its borders, whose demands for independence have fuelled a long, drawn-out and bloody conflict, Turkey fears such a state would further escalate these ambitions and set a dangerous precedent, establishing an

ethnic and political link to an independent Kurdish state next door. Hence, Erdogan's insistence that Turkey will never allow Syria to be divided.

This situation highlights how Turkey continues to embrace a narrative of empire the West eschewed long ago. France, Britain and Germany are very different countries to those of 1914 but Turkey still views the ethnic groups it once ruled – within and on its borders – as subject peoples who must know their place. The largest non-Muslim minorities were largely eliminated during World War I and the decades that followed through genocide, massacres, population transfers and state sponsored intimidation. While these atrocities were recognised by the international community, Turkey has spent the last century denying them. Initially, this denial sought to legitimize its borders, a goal it has largely achieved. However, the narrative of a nation under siege by weaker neighbours and vulnerable ethnic groups has persisted throughout this period.

One thing that unites Turks across all political persuasions is their foreign policy toward indigenous minorities in and around the country. These minorities have no right to a state that could potentially challenge Turkey's borders. Turkey seeks hegemony in the Balkans and Middle Eastern affairs, and any attempts to highlight this are met with a narrative of victimhood, as though European empires were the victims of those who sought independence and control over their own affairs.

Those who argue Russia will be unhappy as it sees its influence waning in Syria miss an important point. Turkey will pursue its own interests, independent of both Russia and the USA, when it comes to the Kurds, Armenians, and Cyprus-peoples and territories historically rooted in former imperial lands in which Turkey continues to demand a vested interest. Putin understands this very well. Both Russia and Turkey, like much of the world, follow a realpolitik approach. Aggressive power

is not seen as a dirty concept; it is simply how the world works. The West, on the other hand, as the victor of the Second World War and the Cold War, has attempted to forge a new world of peace and cooperation—a vision that now blinds many of its citizens to how the rest of the world operates

Turkey will play along with the West whilst it is in its interests to do so but morality is not a concern when it does not. That argument is only used in dealings with the West. Putin's Russia operates along similar imperial lines, with both countries understanding they exist in a brutal, Hobbesian world—a state system marked by anarchy, where all are vying for power against each other and shaping their own strategies accordingly.

The traditional imperial state system viewed power alliances as transactional, requiring flexibility as circumstances evolved. And those circumstances are changing. Russia cannot afford to fight on multiple fronts, while Turkey must respond to a changing world to maintain (and potentially extend) its power and influence. The difference is Turkey is on the rise, while Russia is in decline

Negotiations and understandings between the two countries leave little doubt that deals are being struck behind closed doors, such as Putin's call for Erdogan to serve as a Middle East peace broker regarding Israel ([despite his anti-Semitic and anti-Israel rhetoric](#)), and his abandonment of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh to their fate. The latter is significant because it shows how Putin is willing to compromise on historically Russian interests to maintain focus on his current priority: the war in Ukraine. While Westerners may understand this political chess game, many fail to appreciate Turkey's own agenda

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Kurdish youth commemorated the 1977 May Day massacre

denying independence to those groups), the last remaining sizeable minority has been the Kurds. The Kurds presented a slightly different challenge because, unlike other 'othered' groups, they were Muslim, and thus there could be no call for jihad to unite a frenzied war of extermination against them. However, Atatürk addressed this issue differently, and Turkey has followed his example for the past ninety years—denying Kurdish language and ethnicity (they were labelled 'mountain Turks') until fairly recently and maintaining an extremely brutal occupation of their lands.

Many Turks lament the number of innocent Turkish soldiers killed by Kurdish rebels without considering why the rebels are fighting or the atrocities committed against them. When Kurdish terrorist groups emerged in the 1970s, Turkey adopted a classic stance of obfuscation, deflecting from the real issues. These groups were portrayed as Armenian terrorists trying to undermine the Turkish state, as Armenians hold a similar position in Turkey to that of Jews in anti-Semitic rhetoric. [Anti-Armenian sentiment in Turkey functions much like anti-Semitism](#), with the ethnic group continuing to be

reviled and demonized in Turkish society, fuelled by a hostile press and politicians who use scapegoating to avoid confronting their own chauvinism and racism. It is a mini version of the "Jewish world conspiracy" narrative, in this case an alleged Armenian conspiracy to destroy Turkey.

What is the situation now? Without understanding Turkey's agenda, it cannot be fully grasped. Firstly, Turkey's primary goal is to crush the Kurds in Syria. Secondly, to extend its influence further beyond its borders (it already has troops in five countries: Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, and Qatar), using political and economic leverage to expand its power. As more Muslim countries descend into chaos, Turkey, as a fellow Muslim nation and thus seen as less of an 'other,' seeks to step in and fill the void—opening markets, especially in Central Asia, and gaining allies. While Turkey faces economic troubles due to Erdogan's reckless megalomania, his legacy—already largely in place—will be the establishment of a new Ottomanism and pan-Turkic influence, stretching from North Africa to the borders of China. The personal outcome for Erdogan's corruption (whether imprisoned, dealt with by the Turks themselves, or fleeing to Qatar) will not alter this larger vision.

The West may be pleased to see the Assad regime collapse and Russia's influence weakened in the Middle East, but the emerging picture is one of Turkey—just as chauvinistic and aggressive in its aims—taking their place. Short-term support for Turkey's ousting of at least two entities the West wants removed from the region comes at the cost of further suffering for the Kurds, who have been abandoned more than once—not only in Turkey but also in Syria and Iraq—to their fate.

The ousting of Islamist groups is a false narrative. Regardless of which Muslim regimes control the region, anti-Semitism will continue to thrive—it remains a staple of Muslim belief. Christians in the Middle East have already been marginalized (Syria, Lebanon, and Armenia). Israel is viewed

as an affront for surviving, refusing to accept defeat or victimhood, and thriving in the face of adversity—an abomination to notions of Islamic superiority. The 'woke' in the West claim to see prejudice everywhere, except when it comes to the prejudices held by those they consider victims. By viewing all Muslims as victims, they overlook the oppression faced by Christians, Jews, Yazidis, and other religious minorities who continue to suffer at the hands of their Muslim neighbours.

Power politics, in Western eyes, is driven purely by economic interests, but Westerners fail to recognize that non-Western regimes are often guided by ideologies the West no longer embraces, such as religious and racial discrimination. Turkey's agenda in Syria is not about making the Middle East a safer place for liberal and democratic values to thrive but about asserting its dominance, particularly by suppressing ethnic groups like the Kurds, ensuring they remain subjugated and do not gain independence.