

President Donald Trump and the Kurds

by Michael Curtis



The new predicament in the Middle East is of two friends drifting apart, and pretending it isn't the ending. Bad news is more sudden than good news which is gradual. The seemingly simple phone call on October 6, 2019 between President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has led to immediate changes in Middle Eastern politics, and relations between the U.S., Syria, Turkey, Russia, and the Kurds. The region of north-east Turkey has become more destabilized, a humanitarian crisis has rapidly evolved with the movement of an estimated 160,000 people from their home as Turkish troops advance, the entrance of Russian military police patrolling an area along the Syrian-Turkish border, a greater threat has emerged of resurgence of the Islamic Republic and ISIS, and

there is fear of "ethnic cleansing," in north Syria.

It is no secret that the Trump administration has wanted to pull out of the Syrian imbroglio "as safely and quickly as possible" in the belief that the danger of ISIS has passed, and that the role of the U.S. as peacemakers along the Turkish border with Syria had ended. Much of the elimination of the danger has been due to the Kurds, partners and allies for five years of the U.S., which had supplied them with arms, and money, and air strikes, and which controlled about a quarter of the Syrian land mass. For the Trump administration the Kurds have been good partners, yet it holds that the U.S. will not fight Turkey on their behalf.

It is this change in attitude that some regard as Trump's betrayal of the Kurds in an attempt to improve relations with Turkey. The U.S. is not immune from changes of policy or refusal to help, as in the Bay of Pigs in April 1961, the withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, and inaction in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, but Trump's decision to withdraw the 1,000 troops, which had largely acted as peacemakers along the Turkish border with Syria, is a callous act. He remarked that "anyone who wants to assist Syria in protecting the Kurds is good with me." Is Trump indifferent to the Kurds? It is time, he said, now for others in the region, some of great wealth, to protect their own country,

Trump at first ordered a small contingent of 50 U.S. troops to be pulled back from the border area, and convinced the Kurds to dismantle defensive fortifications along the border. The Trump administration said it was not abandoning Kurdish allies, but it is not helping them. It did not give Turkey a "green light," but its policy led President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to invade Kurdish territory.

The Kurds are the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East, with a particular culture, language, and national identity, and have wanted their own state since the late 1880s

after the Treaty of Berlin of July 1878. They constitute 30 million people spread across the Middle East. As a result of their unhappy experiences, the Kurds have no real friends, but the mountains. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I a possible independent Kurdistan was discussed and proposed at the Treaty of Sevres, August 10, 1920 but the new Turkey prevented it. Instead, areas inhabited by Kurds were divided between Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. This was ratified by the Treaty of Lausanne 1923 which outlined the borders of the republic of Turkey, and left the Kurds without a self-ruled region.

An independent Iraqi Kurdistan emerged in 1992 as an autonomous entity inside Iraq with its own local government and parliament. But Turkey has consistently opposed Kurdish independence in Iraq fearing this would lead to a similar Kurdish entity in adjacent Turkish provinces. The U.S. has been more helpful to the Kurds, supplying military hardware, airstrikes, and money to those fighting Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

In 1990 the U.S. and allies reacted against Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and President Bush encouraged Shiites in Iraq and Kurds to join the U.S. But the UK proposal to create an autonomous Kurdish republic was not supported by the U.S. However, a Kurdish nationalist group, the Kurdish Workers' Party, PKK, had emerged in Turkey in the 1980s, waging a guerrilla war against the Turkish state, in a conflict that has killed more than 40,000 people. The PKK is regarded as a terrorist group not only by Turkey but also by other countries, including the U.S, the UK, and the EU.

During the Syrian civil war, Kurdish forces gained control of key Syrian cities, defending them against ISIS. The area of northeast Syria became a virtual protectorate of the U.S.

The great surprise was the decision of President Donald Trump, in somewhat mercurial fashion, after his telephone

conversation with Erdogan, that U.S. troops would not prevent Turkish forces from entering northeast Syria and clear the areas of the Kurdish fighters that Turkey considered terrorists. Trump's argument is to end any U.S. role in "endless wars in Middle East."

A crucial difficulty is the fact that the main fighter against ISIS was the People's Protection Units, the Y.P.G., the partner of U.S., which Turkey considers part of the PKK, a terrorist organization. The YPG is the militant part of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party, SDF secular and democratic, that drove ISIS extremists from most of the area they once held in NE Syria. They suffered 11,000 casualties in this battle against ISIS. The problem is that a considerable number of the Kurds in the SDF were also members of the PKK that has been fighting against Turkey for more than 35 years, a war in which 40,000 have died. The PKK which once called for independence, now demands greater autonomy for Kurds inside Turkey.

Turkey want to remove SDF from is border, creating a 20 mile buffer zone, but not one in which the U.S. will patrol.

Turkey launched multiple artillery rounds near us special operations outpost in northeast Syria. It invaded Rojava, the Kurdish zone in ne Syria. Its airstrikes have caused at least 100,000 to flee north Syria. It committed a war crime by executing Hevrin Khalaf, a 35 year-old female Kurdish-Syrian politician and engineer, in a car on a public highway. Turkey does not appear to have any long-term strategy, except to deny territory to PKK related groups, and have a 20 mile corridor, a safe zone, and replace Kurds with Syrian Arab refugees.

The U.S. has recognized the unexpected aggression and threats posed by Turkey. As a result, President Trump has called for an immediate cease fire, imposed sanctions and raised steel tariffs on Turkey, and threatened to destroy Turkey's economy. He is suspending arms export licenses for weapons that might

be used in Syria. He has banned Turkish banks from access to U.S. markets. A delegation, including VP Mike Pence, has been sent to Ankara.

A considerable number of factors, some more likely than others, must be considered. A possible clash between Turkey and Syria; the end of self-rule of the Kurds; the entry of Russia eager to replace the U.S. as the peace maker in the area; the resurgence of ISIS; the entrance of Iran in the area with consequent danger to Saudi oil installations, and likelihood to provide greater assistance to Hezbollah for its attacks on Israel. Above all, is the resurgence of ISIS which has already been active with car bombs in Kurdish territory. For the U.S, the main fear is this resurgence of the jihadists. Therefore, a cease fire in the area is urgent to prevent ISIS, Iran, and Russia from expanding their influence. It is sad to envisage the Kurds more close to Iran and Russia than to the U.S.