

Trump's Wise Turkey Policy

It can be the key part of a broad Middle Eastern coalition against Iran.

by Conrad Black



There are three angles for assessing President Trump's announcement of an agreement on Syria with Turkey, even though, like the similar announcement that apparently caused the resignation of former defense secretary James Mattis last year, it has been qualified ambiguously. The ambition to reduce the American presence in Syria should be seen in the context of domestic American politics, its practical effects on the ground, and its broader strategic implications. On domestic politics, it was certainly the correct decision. As the president has finally slipped a couple of points in the polls under the battering of the spurious (and hopeless) Democratic fantasia that the Ukraine non-event may actually threaten the president's hold on his office, it is a wise and timely move to strengthen his supporters' morale by delivering on another campaign promise. There is a widespread fatigue in

the U.S. over its 18 years of steady involvement in Middle Eastern war, with its principal accomplishment of delivering influence over the Shiite 60 percent of Iraq from Saddam Hussein to the Iranian ayatollahs, about the last objective sought by George W. Bush. The U.S. casualties aren't now heavy, but the spectacle, year after year, of the human tragedy in the disintegration of Syria and Iraq, although it has made Israel's life easier, has helped to create a consensus in the United States that despite the role it played in creating some of these circumstances, the United States does not indefinitely belong there.

The practical effects on the ground will depend on the extent to which Turkey adheres to its word in the informal agreement that has apparently been reached between President Trump and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan. If Turkey contents itself with eliminating Kurdish infiltration on its border with Syria, does not release the 10,000 ISIS prisoners detained there (Turkey has no more affection for ISIS than the U.S. does), and does not employ its position to further oppress the Kurds, who, at 14 million, are about 18 percent of the Turkish population, there will be no downside to these arrangements. The Kurdish problem vastly transcends the skirmishing along the Turkish border. There are about 35 million Kurds in the world, the largest concentration being in Turkey, where they have frequently manifested a desire to secede and have often been an oppressed minority. There are broadly 6 million in each of Iraq and Iran, and just 2 million in Syria, and the rest are scattered, including almost 2 million in Germany. The area where Americans are being withdrawn is a small piece of the puzzle, and while there is no doubt that Kurds have been trying to support Kurdish secessionists in Turkey, they have also been valued allies against ISIS in particular, and were no fonder of the Assad regime in Syria than they had been of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. As a practical matter, the Kurds have no prospect of gaining independence anywhere except in the remains of Iraq, where the

current rioting confirms the almost complete failure of the George W. Bush post-Saddam nation-building policy.

There is no solution in sight to the general Kurdish problem, and it is true that the world has failed the Kurds, especially after the successful Gulf War in 1991, when we had the opportunity to ensure autonomy for the Iraqi Kurds and instead condemned them to another decade of the barbarous brigandage of Saddam Hussein. Iraqi Kurdistan is the most politically coherent Kurdish region and, because of its extensive oil reserves and facilities, the most prosperous. To hear the opponents of President Trump's policy, you might think he was withdrawing a whole division from a mission of protecting millions of Kurds from genocide. In fact we are speaking of 400 U.S. servicemen, and if the Turks can replace them adequately and without brutalizing the Syrian Kurds as they do so, this is a viable solution. If they carry their mistreatment of the Kurds into Syria, President Trump has pledged to respond economically. Unless Erdogan has taken complete leave of his senses, this should be a sufficient deterrent.

The larger strategic question is: Whither Turkey? It was one of the original great states of the modern world in the 16th century: Suleiman the Magnificent was one of the greatest rulers of the time, with England's king Henry VIII, France's king Francis I, and the Holy Roman emperor (Spain, Austria, and the Netherlands), Charles V. It continued to be an important power thereafter, and even when the Ottoman Empire was in decline, with the Russians, the Austro-Hungarians, and even the Italians picking pieces off it, and it was reviled as the "Sick Man of Europe," and the "Abominable Port," when it entered World War I, it soundly whipped a British and French invasion force at Gallipoli – inflicting over 300,000 casualties and the greatest defeat in Winston Churchill's career – and more than held its own with the Russians, outlasting that country in the war, as Lenin and Trotsky

seized control and signed a humiliating peace with Germany. Kemal Ataturk modernized and revived Turkey after World War I, and it wisely abstained from World War II but joined the Allies at the end, "to be at the table and not on the menu," as Ataturk's successor, Ismet Inonu, put it. Turkey was a founding member of NATO and a staunch ally for more than 50 years, accepting the deployment of medium-range nuclear-tipped missiles (which President Kennedy agreed to withdraw as part of the Cuban Missile Crisis resolution in 1962, to the irritation of the Turks).

The current ambiguous status of Turkey is in considerable part the responsibility of the Europeans, in cavalierly rebuffing Turkish attempts to join Europe. The desire not to be swamped with Turkish immigrants was understandable, but Europe has received large numbers of Arabs while driving Turkey halfway into the arms of Russia and Iran, and, as President Trump pointed out on Monday, left Syria almost entirely to the Americans to deal with. U.S.–Turkish relations must be seen in the wider arc of legitimate American interests in the region. Europe has rejected the Turks and largely abdicated any serious or coherent foreign-policy role, apart from the U.K., Poland, and the Baltic states, which for obvious reasons feel the Russian presence nervously and are pulling their weight in the alliance. The Europeans, even the otherwise magnificent Margaret Thatcher, never had any Middle Eastern policy except to await American proposals and then put forward something more favorable to the Arabs.

Now that Syria and Iraq have imploded, while Turkish encroachments and, more seriously, Iranian promotion of radical Islam – especially Hamas (Gaza), Hezbollah (Lebanon), and the Houthi (Yemen) – have caused Egypt and Saudi Arabia to ditch the Palestinians, cooperate with Israel, and take the lead in repelling Iran, there is a diplomatic opportunity for the United States. The president seems to be moving in the direction of creating a cooperative framework with the

principal Middle Eastern countries to assist in the containment and deterrence of Iran. Turkey is a natural and historic rival of both Russia and Persia (Iran), and President Trump is right to give Turkey the incentive required to treat the Syrian Kurds reasonably, and to welcome it into an arrangement that constitutes an extension of NATO. Turkey should be embraced as an ally in keeping Iranian influence out of the Middle East and discouraging its support of terrorism, and should be paid the courtesy due to such a vital associate state. Apart from economic and other incentives, any such action would flatter Erdogan's affectations of great-power status. The greater the Turkish influence in Syria and Iraq, the better (they're all Sunni Muslim countries). The West can reinforce the Kurds where they are strongest and richest, in Iraq. Ultimately, the Middle East must be governed by its principal countries, with only the subtlest possible American intervention.

President Trump appears to be assembling an informal coalition of interests between Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Jordan, and the United States. He is on the right track, and most Americans sense this, despite hip-shooting overreactions on Capitol Hill and in the anti-Trump media, which are generally even more ignorant of the Middle East than they are of that incidental part of United States that lies between Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles.

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