

Bad guys, no friends

The domestic popularity of Turkey's latest offensive

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President Trump for abandoning “our allies” the Kurds – a diverse group that includes some supporters of Erdoğan – one wonders where these friendly voices were while Erdoğan’s government was arresting HDP members and flattening Kurdish towns in the southeast over the past four years. If the commentariat is aghast at the sudden developments in Syria, it’s because they haven’t been paying attention. Trump has been threatening to pull troops back from Syria “like, very soon” for well over a year; Turkey has been threatening to invade for longer than that. Erdoğan could hardly have been clearer when he warned in August that, “drying up the terrorist swamp in northern Syria is our top priority”.

President Obama’s one-time dalliance with the much-romanticized People’s Protection Units (YPG) – the Syrian affiliate of a group Washington itself classifies as a terrorist organization, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) – was always unlikely to end well. Legal hocus pocus spared the YPG a terrorist designation, but even Obama’s former Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter acknowledged, at a Senate hearing in 2016, that the YPG had “substantial ties to the PKK”. From Washington’s perspective, siding with the YPG had been a matter of obvious expediency. After IS took Mosul in June 2014, destroying the jihadist group became the Obama administration’s primary goal in Syria, superseding the half-baked idea of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad. When, three months later, the small Kurdish border town of Kobane was about to be overrun by IS, Erdoğan didn’t lift a finger, further infuriating millions of Kurdish citizens in Turkey by not

allowing them to cross the border and join the defence. It was this that spurred the US to support the YPG in Kobane, beginning a fruitful and now abandoned relationship that helped the Kurdish force’s governing body, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), to vastly expand its Syrian territory along the border with Turkey.

Washington, wary of committing large contingents of troops after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, eventually gave up on trying to persuade Ankara to take on IS. Erdoğan’s priorities were to overthrow Assad and to drive the YPG’s forces away from the border, which involved supporting radical groups such as al-Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate al-Nusra, and allowing IS free rein on Turkish soil, at least until mid-2015. But Washington no longer needed Ankara because the YPG was exactly what they’d been looking for – disciplined, secular and already fighting for their survival against IS. With American advisors and air support, the YPG made short work of IS. Ankara’s security concerns, meanwhile, were valid. What if the YPG’s American-supplied weapons and expertise travelled over the border to be used by PKK fighters in Turkey? And sure enough, it emerged that the suicide bombers of the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), a group strongly linked to the PKK, who took part in three gory attacks on civilians in Turkey in 2016, all received training in Syria with the YPG.

I’ve met leftist westerners in Istanbul who castigate themselves for not hopping over the border and picking up a gun, seeing the YPG’s struggle as a new Spanish Civil War. Many Kurdish nationalists and even some Turkish leftists see it the same way. But for most Turks the YPG is indistinguishable from the PKK.

And the PKK is simply “the organization”. Dubbed “baby killers” by the nationalistic press in the 1990s, the group was founded by a megalomaniac named Abdullah Öcalan (Apo), whose first task was to murder every rival Kurdish and leftist group. Later targets included school teachers and newspaper sellers.

Turkish and Kurdish nationalism are both modern creations that emerged out of vicious conflict. They both believe they’re alone in their eternal struggle (“The Turk has no friend but the Turk”, “Kurds have no friends but the mountains”). “When they burned my village down, that’s when I became a Kurd”, a young man told me in 2014 over a meal of liver kebab in Diyarbakır, a city in southeastern Turkey and the unofficial Kurdish capital. Security forces forcibly evacuated over 2,000 villages in the 1990s, burning many to the ground, replicating Ankara’s response to previous eastern uprisings in the 1920s and 30s.

Turkey’s founding ideology was based on a racialized, sacralized form of nationalism that sought, among other things, to eradicate Kurdish identity. The government responded to a series of violent Kurdish uprisings in the early years of the republic by massacring scores of civilians and forcibly displacing many thousands of others. This in turn cultivated a fierce Kurdish nationalist movement that awakened a political consciousness in millions of Kurds. “Turkish nationalism thinks of itself as good. A supreme good, an extremely pure thing”, Koru explained to me. “If you’re homogenizing your nation, and if you’re conglomerating around certain symbols, you also need an enemy, a bad guy.” This is where the PKK comes in. Moreover, Turkish nationalism doesn’t allow for faults. “[The nation] has never done anything wrong ... It has absolutely no room for any kind of self-criticism”, Koru comments of the philosophy. President Erdoğan seemed to illustrate this point in a statement made in October: “Turkey has never committed any civilian massacre in its history and it never will. Our religion and culture would never allow it”.

In stark contrast to the widespread international condemnation of Turkey’s military incursion into northern Syria, the operation has been receiving a cascade of support at home, fuelled in part by a resurgent nationalism. Following the announcement that American troops would be withdrawn from the Syrian–Turkish border, President Erdoğan proposed a “safe zone” along the Syrian side of the border. Using Turkish and Turkish-backed troops, he then began an offensive to enforce the zone on October 9, attempting to clear it of Kurds and Kurdish fighters. As videos of the Turkish-supported rebels massacring an unarmed Kurdish politician emerged the following week, Erdoğan was given a welcome fit for a ghazi at a meeting of his Justice and Development Party (AKP). “Every Turk is born a soldier!” loyalists bellowed as the defence minister Hulusi Akar entered the chamber. Turkish athletes and celebrities have been scoring big points on social media with their salutes to the armed forces, many newspapers are beating the war drums, and school children have formed human chains to spell out the name of the invasion – Operation Fountain of Peace. “There’s a very strong rally around the flag effect”, the political analyst Selim Koru recently told me. “People have very low tolerance for anything against this. So they either shut up, or they post patriotic things.” This nationalist frenzy is spilling into the non-digital world, too. Two men were recently attacked in separate incidents for speaking Kurdish; one – a nineteen-year-old agricultural worker – was killed.

Journalists who are openly critical of the conflict have been taken into custody, along with 186 social media users, and several members of the only major political party to oppose the invasion: the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). Erdoğan informed the European Union that if they continue to call his operation an invasion, he’ll flood them with the 3.6 million refugees his country is hosting. But while American pundits have criticized