

What is driving Turkish expansion? Will Kurdistan return to Ottoman rule?

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Since the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Turkish policy has been distinguished from Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian policies by excessive and persistent violence against the Kurdish people, aimed at completely erasing Kurdish identity. This fact has never been concealed by Turkish governments, whatever their ideological affiliations. Despite this cover-up, the Kurdish question remains one of the most complex issues in the Turkish political and security landscape.

Turkey's policy of denial and prohibition remained unchanged until the 1990s, when large-scale military campaigns were launched against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), even after the arrest of its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, by Turkish intelligence (MIT), with the help of the Mossad, the CIA and NATO countries. Following the interest shown by Western circles in the Kurdish question after 2003, Ankara adopted a dual strategy, mixing military and political actions.

Israel and Turkey sought to overthrow the Assad regime, and the perfect opportunity presented itself with the Arab Spring and the popular uprising in Syria in 2011. Qatar's former prime minister and foreign minister, Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, explicitly stated in May 2017 that Saudi intelligence had requested a colossal \$2 trillion budget to topple the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. He confirmed that "operations cells were set up in 2011 with Saudi, Qatari, Jordanian and Turkish representatives, and that the Americans were present there. Everything went through this committee, whether it was here or there," Hamad said, referring to the "MOC" operations cell in Jordan and the "MOM" operations cell in Turkey. The mission of these cells was to overthrow the Syrian regime under the guise of what would become the Syrian revolution.

At that time, Turkey, Israel, the United States, the West, and the Gulf monarchies considered Syria an enemy state and an ally of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as well as a supporter of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the axis of resistance. She was one of six countries that U.S. politicians openly declared needed to be overthrown.

Because of its geographical proximity, Turkey controlled the flow of money, weapons and training to the terrorist factions gathered in its camps and through it to enter Syria to carry out military operations against the Assad regime. The Turkish policy was aimed at overthrowing the Syrian regime, provided that the Kurdish people did not benefit from it and that the scenario of the Iraqi Kurdistan region or a federalism in the image of post-Saddam Iraq did not recur.

The Kurdish community was deeply shocked by the choices available to them following the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime. On the one hand, most of the Syrian Islamist factions and armed organizations supported by Turkey do not recognize the rights of the Kurdish people and consider them allied with the Assad regime. On the other hand, the Syrian left-wing and secular forces were more sensitive to the abuses and injustices suffered by the Kurdish people. Unfortunately, for various reasons, the Syrian opposition lost its independence and the Turkish intelligence service (MIT) took control of most of the Syrian political parties, organizations and armed factions. The Turkish government has also co-opted Syrian Kurdish factions, arming and funding them. The family leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has contributed to the realization of this Turkish project.

The presence of Arabs and some Syrian Kurds in the Turkish sphere of influence has given Ankara considerable leeway to dominate Syrian politics. Ankara has also consolidated its control over some Kurdish factions outside its borders, particularly in Iraq and Syria, which has helped to strengthen its influence throughout the region. This amounted to a return of Ottoman Kurdistan to the empire.

During the civil war, the Kurds established a functioning autonomous civil administration in northeastern Syria (Rojava), which angered Ankara, which was waiting for an opportunity to eliminate it. Specifically, the Kurdish administration was a long-standing target of the Turkish project.

At certain times, some Kurdish political parties and figures had the impression that Western countries – America, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and other NATO countries – were giving serious support to the Kurdish people in building their independent state or a federal system, despite Turkish opposition to this project.

This trend was accentuated when the US government repeatedly summoned Kurdish leaders to the White House or various European capitals to meet with senior US and European officials, as well as leaders of the Kurdish parties of the "KDP" and the "YNK", and then Mazloun Abdi and Ilham Ahmed, leaders of "Rojava". The U.S. government was convinced of the important role played by the SDF on the Syrian scene and of the possibility of exploiting this role in the current political context to strengthen its policy and project in the Middle East. It has established military bases in the north of Syrian territory, where oil wells and agricultural production areas are located, and in the south, on the strategic base of al-Tanf, in southeastern Syria, at the meeting point of the Syrian-Iraqi borders.

On the Kurdish side, the radical change in the American position has caused a shock. The flight of Bashar al-Assad and the entry of Ahmed al-Sharaa into Damascus marked a geostrategic turning point in Western policy in the Middle East. Al-Sharaa's past was quickly forgotten, and General Mazloun Abdi, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, was ordered to integrate his forces into the interim government formed in Damascus by al-Sharaa, a government united by a single political affiliation. Al-Sharaa was considered a "terrorist", while Mazloun Abdi was perceived as a "partner" by the United States. However, the situation was later reversed: the ex-terrorist was received at the White House by President Trump, who expressed his support for him. At the same time, Tom Barrack, the US ambassador to Iraq and Syria, imposed directives on Mazloun Abdi, the "partner".

Everything that has happened in Syria since 2011 has been orchestrated in large part by NATO countries, the Gulf monarchies and Israel. Even terrorist organizations and groups, regardless of their names, affiliations and countries of origin, have remained mostly under the umbrella of NATO countries. For example, Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly Abu Muhammad al-Julani) was manipulated by Turkey. In addition, in 2017, the US State Department announced a reward of up to \$10 million for information leading to his arrest under the pretext of "counter-terrorism in the Middle East" as part of its "Rewards for Justice" program. As an important member of the alliance, Turkey has played a major role in restraining and weakening the Assad regime by leading takfiri terrorist organizations operating from its territory.

In response, Russia intervened militarily on Iran's side to support the Assad regime and the axis of resistance. Israel's goal was to eliminate Iranian influence in Syria, prevent the flow of weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon and some Palestinian factions, realize the David Corridor project, and expand its influence in the Middle East. As for Turkey, it has expansionist ambitions and sees this situation as a propitious opportunity to realize its neo-Ottoman aspirations, while controlling the unpredictable development of the Kurdish question and preventing the Kurds from gaining autonomy or establishing relations with Washington or European governments, which could lead to the creation of a Kurdish state.

Israel is in a situation comparable to Turkey's expansionist ambitions, especially since almost all authoritarian Arab regimes are either subjugated, paralyzed by internal unrest, or plunged into chaos, repressing their populations and stifling freedoms. All of this fuels the desire for expansion and the creation of a Greater Israel. The current situation in Syria, characterized by Israeli and Turkish impunity, testifies to the extent of the collapse of the Syrian state and the disintegration of its institutions.

The pressure exerted by US Ambassador Tom Barrack on the leaders of Rojava is part of the American strategy in the Middle East. There is no point in applying the same coercive tactics to the KDP's family leadership, given its long-standing involvement in the Turkish project. It is highly likely that the Turkish government's recent flexibility towards the PKK is intended to provide a pretext for Öcalan and Qandil to agree to some form of agreement with Erdoğan's government. Specifically, the goal is to consolidate all Kurdish parties and organizations in Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey under the Turkish-American umbrella, i.e., NATO. In the current context of endemic corruption, fragmentation and the absence of a unifying Kurdish national project and sincere and competent leadership, NATO countries will use Kurdish forces as mercenaries, while allowing them to wave the Kurdish flag, dance and sing patriotic songs. And the corrupt leaders and their sons will go unpunished.

Another fact that needs to be addressed is that NATO countries are urging Kurdish forces in northern, eastern and southern Kurdistan to move closer to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, i.e. to distance them from any agreement with Iran or to maintain their neutrality. This is the main reason for the manipulation of the Kurdish question by NATO countries.

Whatever the apparent differences between Turkey and Israel, the two countries are subservient to their master in Washington, serve American strategies in the Middle East and will not break out of the American straitjacket, especially given the good relations that Donald Trump has with Erdogan and Netanyahu.

Turkish chauvinism does not tolerate the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish administration, either in Iraq or Syria. On the contrary, he seeks by all means to control it once formed. The Iraqi and Syrian experience has demonstrated this. No sooner had Baghdad and Damascus loosened their grip on the Kurdish regions than Ankara rushed to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of central authority. It has had no difficulty in subjecting the ruling family of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to its colonial project – economically, politically, militarily and security-wise – and now wants the leaders of Rojava to adopt the same position as those of the KDP in Iraq. If you refuse, the consequences will be disastrous.

Turkey has many levers of influence over Kurdish parties that retain a certain decision-making autonomy, or more precisely, over leaders who do not submit entirely to Turkish diktats. Turkey has several strengths, including:

- Excessive power, and after preaching the Turkish army of elements whose loyalty to the Justice and Development Party leadership was questionable, it was subjected to the political authority in place.
- Ankara is a member of NATO, and it is impossible for the countries of the alliance to ignore Turkish security and interests because of the Kurdish issue, which involves non-state actors, given the desire of the United States, since the overthrow of the Assad regime, to deal with a strong central government in Baghdad and Damascus.
- Abdullah Öcalan is imprisoned.
- The leadership of the "KDP" is subject to Turkish agendas.
- (Lashkare Rozh) the Kurdish governorate of Dohuk receives orders from Turkey and coordinates with the KDP leadership.
- Armed and Turkish-trained terrorist groups are present in Syria and can be used against the Kurdish people whenever the Turkish government wishes.
- The Syrian government, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, takes its orders from the Turkish government.
- Perhaps the most important factor in the strengthening of Turkish influence on the Kurdish issue is the overt division within the Kurdish community, the loss of sincerity and integrity in bilateral political relations, and

the support given by some Kurdish armed parties and factions to Ankara's colonial projects, whether overtly or covertly.

- Its control over the waterways that are the source of life for agriculture in Iraq.

It would undoubtedly have been positive if Iraq's Kurdish leaders had seized these opportunities to establish a Kurdish administration at the service of their people, instead of allowing this historic opportunity to be exploited by families greedy for wealth, prestige and power, acting with impunity. When events demonstrated their disconnect with reality and their inability to properly assess regional and international relations, they preferred to accuse this or that state of treason, refusing to acknowledge that they had squandered this historic opportunity for their people. However, it is too late to rectify the situation. The incompetence and preoccupation with trivialities of the current leadership, since it came to power more than thirty-five years ago, has been a major burden and obstacle to any evolution of Kurdish authority. From the imposition of a hereditary succession at the head of the party to its extension to government posts, despite the failures and scandals that have affected most of the economic, administrative, military and security sectors, this approach has proved ineffective.

The Middle East is entering a phase of profound geostrategic upheavals that will determine the future of all nations and peoples in the region. If the fate of the Kurdish people remains in the hands of traditional leaders who paralyse the political process and are reluctant to think critically about major historical changes and events, others will decide their fate and future.

In any case, we are currently going through a phase similar to the Battle of Chaldiran and its aftermath, which took place on August 23, 1514 between the Ottoman forces led by Sultan Selim I (Yavuz) and the Safavid forces led by Shah Ismail I. Subsequent events will reveal whether we have learned from our history, which is so rich in lessons and examples, or whether we simply do not.

As for the Arab peoples, they are faced with difficult choices: either to go ahead with the Abraham Accords, or to return to the bosom of the Turkish Empire, or do these peoples still have the will and energy to conquer their freedom and independence and to get rid of the odious dictatorships imposed on them from abroad?