

“No Angels”: Kurdish Militias, “Betrayal” and the Campaign to Destroy Syria

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It is presently fashionable, but totally erroneous to aver that the Kurds have been “betrayed”. The truth is that the Kurds and the Americans have used each other for their mutual ends in the Syrian War, a catastrophe orchestrated by the United States and its regional allies Saudi Arabia and the State of Israel.

For the Saudis, the animus against the Assad government is based on the fact that it is ruled by what is considered by mainstream Sunni Muslims to be a heretical minority, the Alawites, whose alliance with Shia Iran poses a threat to Saudi influence in the Muslim Arab world.

And for the Israelis, it is the threat posed by the Triple Entente of Iran, Syria and the Lebanese militia, Hezbollah, an alliance that is sometimes referred to as the “Shia Crescent”. The destabilisation and the destruction of Syria would, from Israel’s perspective, have achieved three goals. Firstly, the weakening of Iranian influence in the region. Secondly, the isolating of Hezbollah, the militant Shia group created out of the embers of Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in the early 1980s, which was responsible for the Jewish state’s withdrawal from the south of that country on two occasions. It is Hezbollah that has prevented the longstanding goal of colonising Lebanon south of the Litani River. Thirdly, a fractured Syria would from an Israeli view mean that no successor state would make a legal claim for the restoration of the Golan Heights, which was illegally annexed in 1981.

The object of Israel has always been to balkanise its Arab Muslim neighbours, and the enduring influence of its lobby in the United States is the overriding factor in this enterprise which provided the Saudis with the role of funding the anti-Assad jihadist insurrection begun in 2011. Israel, for its part, provided medical, logistical and financial assistance to a number of these jihadi fanatics and struck at Assad’s forces to weaken the Syrian effort in confronting them.

It is useful to be reminded of a declassified U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) document circulated in 2012 which explicitly sought the creation of a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in eastern Syria. The so-called Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist-orientated militias functioned as the U.S.’s proxy army to achieve this end.

But Russian intervention with the help of Iranian soldiers and Hezbollah — all invited onto Syrian soil by the legitimate government of the country — beat back the threat posed by IS. The Americans, whose presence in parts of Syria is illegal, reacted by arming, training and supplying Kurdish militias such as the YPG to continue the quest of creating a statelet in oil-endowed eastern Syria.

Those who are versed in the history of the region know that the Turks will not tolerate the creation of an independent Kurdish state on its border. Moreover, members of the Syrian-based YPG also operate as guerrillas for the Turkish-based PKK, a group designated by the Turks as well as the U.S. and the EU as a terrorist organisation.

The Turks are of course no innocents in regard to the Syrian War. They were part of the original U.S.-Saudi-Israeli effort to overthrow the Assad government. Turkey provided a route through which jihadist fighters could infiltrate Syria's borders. The Turkish Army High Command furnished these mercenaries with encampments and training facilities, and as IS began carving out its U.S. approved principality in eastern Syria, the Turks facilitated the establishment of this nascent caliphate by buying oil exploited from oil fields previously developed by the Syrian national government. Indeed, many will recall the role played by members of the Erdogan family in this illicit trade.

But while the Turks, like the U.S., the Saudis and the Israelis are no innocents in the enterprise that was geared towards destroying the Ba'athist government of Syria, President Donald Trump described the Kurds as being "no angels".

Do the Kurdish militias have clean hands? An examination of the facts reveals that they do not. For during the quest to carve out a separate, autonomous territory in eastern Syria (Kurds represent just 8% of the population of Syria), Kurdish militias ethnically cleansed the region of its Arab Muslim population and murdered Christian Assyrian communities. As noted earlier on, their primary role was to carve out a chunk of territory and the decision to arm Syrian Kurds taken by Trump in 2017 because it was seen as the fastest way to seize Raqqa, the capital of the proclaimed caliphate. It was a decision of course which drew opposition from Turkey.

The irony is that the Kurds would have been on more secure footing had they joined forces with the legal, secular government of Syria in fighting the locally-bred jihadists, as well as the imported Islamist fighters of al-Qaeda, al-Nusra and IS.

But they have miscalculated. Some accuse Ottoman-era Kurds of having facilitated the genocide of Christian Armenians in the early part of the 20th century, as a means through which they could obtain a state of their own. But they were denied this. And now in the 21st century, they look certain to be denied this.

The famous maxim in international relations of their being no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent national interests may explain Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. forces from this area of Syria. For while the national interests of the Turks, the Saudis and the Israelis are clearly defined, the national interest on the part of the United States in pursuing the policy of balkanising Syria. If the illegal presence of the United States in Syria was indeed to fight jihadis, then it would have logically sided with the Syrian administration.

Those who claim that the Kurds have been "betrayed" do so largely out of ignorance of the wider facts. And among neoconservative figures such as US Senator Marco Rubio and former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley, the frequent references to the Kurdish role in fighting jihadis is to say the least disingenuous. Lindsey Graham, a senator from South Carolina, was perhaps more honest when assessing that the biggest losers from Trump's decision would be the "Kurds and Israel".

For it has been in Israel's interests that the campaign to destroy Syria has been waged, and not, as Graham strongly, albeit inadvertently implies, in the interests of the United States.

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