"THEY SHALL NOT PASS"

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Category: Opinions

By Bernard-Henri Levy, New Republic, 12 October 2014
Translated from French by Steven B. Kennedy

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In a matter of hours.

Or perhaps days.

But the Syrian city will fall, a victim of the cynical reckoning of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, by refusing to act and leaving his powerful army stationed along the border with Syria, just a few kilometers from the already martyred city, seems to have chosen Daesh, otherwise known as the Islamic State, over the Kurds.

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Kobane will be a victim of the double game of Turkey, which, after having let pass every jihadist in the region and closing its eyes to the heavy weaponry that Daesh's forwarders had been sending for weeks toward the besieged city and that is now being used to shell it, shuts everything down, blocks everything, plays the innocent while immobilizing not only its own troops but also the ten thousand Kurdish volunteers who have come forward in Turkey to try to save Kobane.

The outsize miracle of the resistance of Kobane, which so far has succeeded, without resources and against unheard of violence, in delaying the advance of the religious zealots, cannot last much longer now. The fall of the city and the hoisting of the black flag of the Caliphate not only in the eastern and southern quarters but now over the last heights of a place that henceforth will be powerfully symbolic, will be a catastrophe the full extent of which has not yet been appreciated, and certainly not everywhere.

It will be a catastrophe for the combatants both male and female who for weeks have been struggling with unbelievable courage against better-armed units that will make them pay very dearly indeed for their audacity.

It will be a catastrophe for the city itself, where Daesh will not be content, as it has been before, to enslave the women, behead the leaders, or forcibly convert the practitioners of minority religions, but that will assume its place in the long and terrible list of martyred cities of recent decades: Guernica pulverized by the aircraft of the Condor Legion; Coventry razed by the Heinkels of the Luftwaffe; Stalingrad and its million dead; Sarajevo, which escaped with its life, but at the price of eleven thousand dead during a thousand-day siege; Grozny, in Chechnya, ground into a ghost town by Putin's rabble; Aleppo, in Syria, with its treasures of civilization and beauty buried by the explosives dropped from Bashar al-Assad's planes; and now Kobane, the existence of which was unknown to most of us until recently but that it is about to become an urbicide.

It will be a catastrophe, beyond Kobane proper, for secular Kurdistan, the incarnation (if one exists) of the values of moderation and law that the diplomats state as their wish for the Islamic world, and whose Peshmerga, moreover, are the only ones to have taken literally the global order to mobilize against the Daesh hordes and to fight, face to face on the front line against a self-proclaimed state that threatens, as we have been amply warned, not just Kurdistan, but humanity itself.

Because Kobane is not only a symbol but a key, its fall will be a catastrophe, finally, for the coalition of which it is the forward outpost, a coalition that will now see the barbarians of Daesh carve out a wide swath of ground several hundreds of kilometers long adjacent to the Turkish border—a considerable tactical and strategic advantage.

To prevent this disaster we have not only very little time but, above all, paltry means.

The coalition may decide to intensify its strikes, but how does one strike from the air when the battle is being waged hand to hand, street by street, house by house on the outskirts of the city?

The coalition may choose to deliver arms. Even without Turkish assistance, it has the logistical ability to do so. And if it does not do so—if it does not resolve to reestablish a measure of balance between the jihadists who have brought in heavy artillery, sophisticated rocket launchers, and tanks taken from the arsenals of Mosul and Tabah, while the Kurds are armed only with Kalashnikovs, DFDS machine guns, and a few mortars, the citizens of the world still have the freedom to do what we did not so long ago for little Bosnia, which, like Kurdish Kobane, was defending us by defending itself—but what we lack is time. Time is required to organize an airlift of weapons to a besieged population caught in a vise, and time is what we do not have.

At this late hour, there is only one way to save what remains of Kobane, and that way is Turkey.

Erdogan, whose judgment has been clouded by his obsessional fear of seeing an embryonic Kurdish

state created just outside his borders, must be reminded—once again—that Daesh is no less his enemy and that it is for Turkey that the bell tolls in Kobane.

He must be made to understand that if his increasingly authoritarian and benighted regime, one that strays ever farther from the secular foundations of Kemalism, is to preserve its chance to forge the economic partnerships with Europe (and eventually, the political partnerships) to which Turkey's elites aspire and that the country sorely needs, that chance passes through Kobane and its defense: That chance depends on the aid delivered to the heroines and the heroes of the beleaguered city.

But we have to go even further and tell Erdogan, formally or informally, that the battle against Daesh is the moment of truth, the now or never, for the alliances and the system of collective security that was established in the region in the aftermath of the second world war, a system in which Turkey is more than an ordinary member, having become its eastern pillar when it joined NATO in 1952.

In 1991, Turkey only reluctantly joined in operations to support the civilian population of northern Iraq.

On March 1, 2003, Turkey's Grand National Assembly, in a vote that cast a long shadow over the country's relations with its allies, voted against allowing 62,000 American troops to pass through Turkey on their way to Baghdad or to be based in Turkey.

If Turkey stands down a third time—if Kobane becomes the name of yet another Turkish default, this one inexcusable—its future in NATO is in doubt.

The emissaries of President Barack Obama who have just arrived in Ankara should make this very clear.

French President François Hollande, who has given Turkey many signs of friendship, should assume the role of spokesman for France's partners by informing Erdogan that Kobane is a rampart for Europe.

Here, as at the siege of Madrid, the world must declare, "They shall not pass."

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