TURKEY SPINNING OUT OF CONTROL

Posted on March 8, 2016 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

Douglas Kalajian, Boynton Beach, FL, 8 March 2016

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*After ignoring America's repeated pleas, Turkey finally agreed to join the fight against the Islamic State. It then attacked the Kurds in Syria who were fighting the Islamic State.

*Turkey also renewed attacks on Kurds in its own country—Kurds who are in fact Turkish citizens—using the pretext of a separatist uprising. The crackdown is centered in eastern provinces where Kurds are a majority in former Armenian population centers. News photos from Diyarbakir (my father's birthplace) show a smog of tear gas settling over rubble. The city's historic Armenian Catholic church was among those damaged.

*Turkey's incursion in Syria has brought it dangerously close to Russian forces conducting air strikes against rebels. The Russians support the government of Bashar Assad, who provides Russia with its only naval port on the Mediterranean. Turkey wants Assad and the Kurds out of its way. So far, there have been no direct clashes with the Russians (there's currently a fragile cease-fire), but there's widespread doubt this can continue. All this comes while Putin continues to seethe over Turkey's downing of a Russian fighter jet in November.

*Making all this worse, Turkey is convulsing over a series of bombings and terror attacks in Istanbul

and elsewhere that have brought tourism to a standstill. Responsibility for the turmoil has been split between Kurds and ISIS, but many observers blame government provocation for the action of Kurdish militants. The government also can't escape blame for the ISIS attacks, as it was crucial in abetting the terrorist organization's rise by allowing it to recruit in Turkey and giving it border access as its fighters moved into Iraq.

*The Erdogan government has reacted to both the turmoil and widespread domestic criticism by tightening its already firm grip on the press. Last week, authorities seized the nation's most widely read newspaper, Zaman, and replaced the editors with government trustees. Crowds chanting in support of free speech were dispersed by riot police firing tear gas (see the photo at the top of this column). "The crackdown on expression comes amid a growing sense that Turkey, once seen as a bastion of stability in the region, is being enveloped by instability," the New York Times reported. The Times story included these chilling words from journalist Asli Aydintasbas, who lost her column in the Milliyet newspaper last year under government pressure: "This pattern is appalling, and Turkey is galloping towards an authoritarian regime full speed ahead."

*Remarkably, the Erdogan government has managed to escape serious criticism from the West and has even drawn praise from Germany. Publicly at least, America continues to entertain the fantasy that Turkey is an ally that shares our democratic values. Turkey, meanwhile, has taken in as many as two million refugees from Syria and elsewhere in the roiling Middle East but many have used it as a transit point in making their way to Europe. The refugees left behind make valuable bargaining chips: Europe doesn't want them, and is willing to overlook Turkey's transgressions if it will keep them away.

What's most troubling is that Turkey's behavior seems increasingly irrational and self-defeating, which could lead to greater repression and aggression. The Washington Post offered this observation from Soli Ozel, professor of international relations at Istanbul's Kadir Has University:

"Turkey now stands completely isolated, trapped in a maze of quandaries that are partly of its own making. It has so alienated everyone it cannot convince anyone to do anything. It is a country whose words no longer carry any weight. It bluffs but does not deliver. It cannot protect its vital interests, and it is at odds with everyone, including its allies."

The pressing question for Armenia is whether those allies will fight on Turkey's side if it goads Russia into war. That's clearly what Erdogan hopes, although it's frightening to think he'd take the risk.

Turkey has been a member of NATO since 1949, back when we worried that the Soviet Union would see it as an easy target. The treaty pledges every NATO member to defend any other member against an attack. But it also obligates each member to promote peaceful relations and settle any disputes by peaceful means. It's hard to argue that Turkey hasn't repeatedly violated those terms.

I continue to believe Armenia's smartest defensive move—genius, really—lies in out-sourcing border

patrols to the Russians. Turkey can't cross the border without tangling with the biggest boy on the block. But Turkey is reportedly building new military bases near the Armenian border in Georgia and Azerbaijan, a sign that it may be willing to test Putin's patience as well as America's allegiance.

Russia, meanwhile, has shipped Armenia a fresh supply of fighter jets, missiles and Russian support troops. If that sounds comforting, consider what happened the last time the Russians rode to Armenia's rescue.

The first Republic surrendered to the Soviets in 1920 in return for Russia's promise to protect its territory. Soon after occupying the capital, the Russians turned over about 80 percent of that territory—and the surviving Armenians who lived there— to the Turks and Azeris.

You don't have to go back that far for more sobering reminders that Russia always hedges its bets. It has provided more than three-quarters of the weapons for Azerbaijan's armed forces, which have stepped up sniper attacks and raids on Karabagh in violation of the cease-fire there.

In sum, it's a dangerous and unpredictable situation changing so rapidly it's hard to keep track of. I've been paying even closer attention since a friend forwarded information the other day on how Armenians in the diaspora can join the homeland's army in the event of war. That got my attention, although luckily for all concerned I'm about 30 years and many pounds past being any use in that regard.

What raised my initial question about the awareness of other Armenian Americans is that I've heard friends say, "Don't worry, Putin has Armenia's back." Or, more disturbingly, "Putin is Armenia's friend."

There's an awful lot I don't know about world affairs but I'm certain of this: Mr. Putin is nobody's friend.

He is a Russian nationalist who will fiercely defend his own turf with no particular regard for anyone else's. If you doubt that, ask a Ukrainian. Then ask yourself why Putin would feel greater affection for Armenians than for a people who share his Slavic roots and Orthodox religion.

This does not make him an enemy, but he's an ally to be wary of. Put it this way: He wouldn't necessarily be your first choice if you wanted to give a neighbor a spare key to your house. Of course, that's assuming you had a choice of good neighbors to rely on.

Unfortunately, Armenia doesn't.

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Douglas Kalajian, author of "Stories My Father Never Finished Telling Me", shares his thoughts about being Armenian, writing and whatever else comes to mind.

"His polished, sometimes even poetic prose evokes a sense of curiosity and lament. In response to his

family's silence—and to the silence of a whole people still shellshocked by their grim treatment—Kalajian has become a professional storyteller and an excellent one at that." —Kirkus Reviews