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Speak Out Now

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Who are the Kurds? Why is Turkey Trying to Kill Them?

Following Trump's order for the U.S. military to withdraw from Kurdish territory, attention has been focused on the Kurds in Northern Syria. To understand what's at stake, and what's behind Turkey's attacks, it's important to understand the history of the Kurdish people and their struggle for freedom, and often for their very existence.

The Kurdish people are an ethnic group that traditionally lived in the mountainous regions that lie in between modern-day Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. For thousands of years, until the 20th century, the Kurds lived as subjects of the various Middle Eastern empires, most recently the Ottoman Empire. These empires were patchwork quilts of ethnic groups – Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Greek, and Eastern European peoples. The Ottoman Empire was ruled by a wealthy Turkish elite from Istanbul. However each ethnic group maintained its own customs and affairs, playing various roles in maintaining the empire. For example, Kurds made up important military units in the Ottoman army.

Everything changed after World War I. The Ottoman Empire had been in severe economic decline and deeply indebted to big European banks. During the war, the Ottomans sided with Germany against Britain and France, and lost everything. In 1920, the British and French divided the Middle East up to exert their control. The British drew new borders around Iraq to control the oil, and Jordan and Palestine to contain and control the population there. The oil in the Persian Gulf was protected by the Shah of Iran. The French took control of Syria and created the country of Lebanon where their important trading and banking operations were centered.

In modern-day Turkey, the center of the Ottoman Empire, the European powers planned to carve the territory into smaller states. However, the Ottoman military, led by Kemal Attaturk, revolted and led a popular uprising in 1923. The European powers, exhausted by the war, withdrew and Attaturk established modern day Turkey.

The Turkish state was founded on an ideology of ethnic domination. As opposed to the Ottoman Empire's patchwork quilt of ethnicities, the Turkish republic would be one, strong state, ruled by ethnic Turks. With 10-15% of the population of Turkey being Kurds, this presented a problem. The Turkish government declared the Kurds to be "mountain Turks" and banned their language and culture. This began decades of struggle by the Kurds for self-determination.

The Kurdish struggle has continued throughout the 20th century without achieving the goal of self-determination. Today, in southeast Turkey, 15 million Kurdish people live under the oppressive rule of the Turkish state. They have participated in legal, political protest, supporting parties that argue for Kurdish rights as well as social reforms and protections for the poor. They have also organized armed struggle such as the guerrilla war led by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The Kurdish movement in Turkey has grown strong, organized, and has become a major obstacle for the Turkish elite led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The U.S. has long supported its Turkish ally, with its powerful military and declared the PKK a terrorist organization.

The Syrian civil war provided unexpected opportunities for the Kurds led by the PKK. They established the Autonomous Administration of North-Eastern Syria, or Rojava, after Syrian troops withdrew from the region in 2012. The Kurds in Syria not only have an organized movement, they also have a territory governed by Kurds, a base for the movement. For this reason, Erdogan prepared a bloody military strike to eliminate them. All it took was the go-ahead from President Trump and Turkey launched its bloody invasion of Northern Syria.

The Kurdish people deserve their rights, above all the right to self determination. It's up to us to oppose the Turkish state's ideology of racism and cultural genocide which is driving its brutal attacks on the Kurdish people.