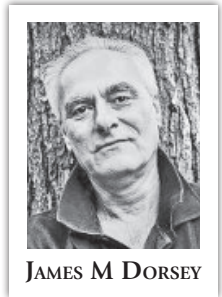


TURKEY AND THE KURDS

What goes around comes around



JAMES M DORSEY

TURKEY, like much of the Middle East, is discovering that what goes around comes around.

Not only because President Recep Tayyip Erdogan appears to have miscalculated the fallout of what may prove to be a foolhardy intervention in Syria and neglected alternative options that could have strengthened Turkey's position without sparking the ire of much of the international community.

But also because what could prove to be a strategic error is rooted in a policy of decades of denial of Kurdish identity and suppression of Kurdish cultural and political rights that was more likely than not to fuel conflict rather than encourage societal cohesion.

The policy midwifed the birth in the 1970s to militant groups like the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which only dropped its demand for Kurdish independence in recent years.

The group that has waged a low intensity insurgency that has cost tens of thousands of lives has been declared a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States and the European Union.

Turkish refusal to acknowledge the rights of the Kurds, who are believed to account for up to 20 percent of the country's population traces its roots to the carving of modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire by its visionary founder, Mustafa Kemal, widely known as Atatürk, Father of the Turks.

It is entrenched in Mr Kemal's declaration in a speech in 1923 to celebrate Turkish independence of "how happy is the one who calls himself a Turk," an effort to forge a national identity for a country that was an ethnic mosaic.

The phrase was incorporated half a century later in Turkey's student oath and ultimately removed from it in 2013 at a time of peace talks between Turkey and the PKK by then prime minister, now president Erdogan.

It took the influx of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds in the late 1980s and early 1990s as well as the 1991 declaration by the United States, Britain and France of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq that enabled the emergence of an autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region to spark debate in Turkey about the Kurdish question and prompt the government to refer to Kurds as Kurds rather than mountain Turks.



Turkish troops and Turkish-backed Syrian rebels gather outside the border town of Ras al-Ain on October 12, 2019, during their assault on Kurdish-held border towns in northeastern Syria.

PHOTO: NAZEER AL-KHATIB/AFP

Ironically, Turkey's enduring refusal to acknowledge Kurdish rights and its long neglect of development of the predominantly Kurdish southeast of the country fuelled demands for greater rights rather than majority support for Kurdish secession largely despite the emergence of the PKK.

Most Turkish Kurds, who could rise to the highest offices in the land as long as they identified as Turks rather than Kurds, resembled Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, whose options were more limited even if they endorsed the notion of a Jewish state.

Nonetheless, both minorities favoured an independent state for their brethren on the other side of the border but did not want to surrender the opportunities that either Turkey or Israel offered them.

The existence for close to three decades of a Kurdish regional government in northern Iraq and a 2017 referendum in

which an overwhelming majority voted for Iraqi Kurdish independence, bitterly rejected and ultimately nullified by Iraqi, Turkish and Iranian opposition, did little to fundamentally change Turkish Kurdish attitudes.

If the referendum briefly soured Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish relations, it failed to undermine the basic understanding underlying a relationship that could have guided Turkey's approach towards the Kurds in Syria even if dealing with Iraqi Kurds may have been easier because, unlike Turkish Kurds, they had not engaged in political violence against Turkey.

The notion that there was no alternative to the Turkish intervention in Syria is further countered by the fact that Turkish PKK negotiations that started in 2012 led a year later to a ceasefire and a boosting of efforts to secure a peaceful resolution.

The talks prompted imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan to publish a letter

endorsing the ceasefire, the disarmament and withdrawal from Turkey of PKK fighters, and a call for an end to the insurgency. Mr Ocalan predicted that 2013 would be the year in which the Turkish Kurdish issues would be resolved peacefully.

The PKK's military leader, Cemil Bayik, told the BBC three years later that "we don't want to separate from Turkey and set up a state. We want to live within the borders of Turkey on our own land freely."

The talks broke down in 2015 against the backdrop of the Syrian war and the rise as an ally of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State of the PKK's Syrian affiliate, the People's Protection Units (YPG).

Bitterly opposed to the US-YPG alliance, Turkey demanded that the PKK halt its resumption of attacks on Turkish targets and disarm prior to further negotiations.

Turkey responded to the breakdown and resumption of violence with a brutal

crackdown in the southeast of the country and on the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

Nonetheless, in a statement issued from prison earlier this year that envisioned an understanding between Turkey and Syrian Kurdish forces believed to be aligned with the PKK, Mr Ocalan declared that "we believe, with regard to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the problems in Syria should be resolved within the framework of the unity of Syria, based on constitutional guarantees and local democratic perspectives. In this regard, it should be sensitive to Turkey's concerns."

Turkey's emergence as one of Iraqi Kurdistan's foremost investors and trading partners in exchange for Iraqi Kurdish acquiescence in Turkish countering the PKK's presence in the region could have provided inspiration for a US-sponsored safe zone in northern Syria that Washington and Ankara had contemplated.

The Turkish-Iraqi Kurdish understanding enabled Turkey to allow an armed Iraqi Kurdish force to transit Turkish territory in 2014 to help prevent the Islamic State from conquering the Syrian city of Kobani.

A safe zone would have helped "realign the relationship between Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its Syrian offshoot... The safe-zone arrangements... envision(ed) drawing down the YPG presence along the border—a good starting point for reining in the PKK, improving US ties with Ankara, and avoiding a potentially destructive Turkish intervention in Syria," Turkey scholar Sonar Cagaptay suggested in August.

The opportunity that could have created the beginnings of a sustainable solution that would have benefitted Turkey as well as the Kurds fell by the wayside with Mr Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from northern Syria.

In many ways, Mr Erdogan's decision to opt for a military solution fits the mould of a critical mass of world leaders who look at the world through a civilisational prism and often view national borders in relative terms.

Russian leader Vladimir Putin pointed the way with his 2008 intervention in Georgia and the annexation in 2014 of Crimea as well as Russia's stirring of pro-Russian insurgencies in two regions of Ukraine.

Mr Erdogan appears to believe that if Mr Putin can pull it off, so can he.

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A flawed artiste in a flawed world

What to make of Handke's Nobel triumph?



TASNEEM TAYEB

IN awarding the Nobel Prize in literature to Peter Handke, the award committee said, "it's not the academy's mandate to balance literary quality against political considerations." We need to talk about this.

The announcement of this year's Nobel winner for literature to Peter Handke, has caught the world by surprise, including the writer himself, who in his reaction said that he was "astonished" and termed the decision "very courageous by the Swedish Academy". And why not: Peter Handke is known to be a sympathiser of Slobodan Milosevic and an apologist for the Srebrenica genocide. Handke was so close to Milosevic that the latter bestowed the "Order of the Serbian Knight" upon him for his commitment to the Serbian cause: a cause of butchery and genocide.

Among his many preposterous comments, the worst was perhaps Handke's suggestion that the Muslims of Sarajevo had "massacred themselves" in order to frame the Serbian military. As if this was not enough, Handke went as far as to suggest that there were atrocities committed on both sides in order to downplay the existence of "concentration camps" in Bosnia, where thousands of Muslim men, women and children had been tortured and killed, "True, there were intolerable camps between 1992 and 1995 on the territories of the Yugoslav republics, especially in Bosnia ... But let's stop automatically connecting these camps to the Serbs in Bosnia. There were also Croat camps and Muslim camps, and the crimes

committed here and there are and will be judged at the Hague."

And his outrageous denial of the Srebrenica genocide didn't just end there. According to the *Irish Times*, while trying to deny the atrocities committed by the Serbs against the Muslims, Handke belligerently said, "You can stick your corpses up you're a se!" when critics pointed to the corpses of the victims as evidence of the genocide.

Handke has been so unpopular among the people in general for his support for Milosevic and the brutal violence they had perpetrated on the victims of Bosnia, that when Handke was awarded with the International Ibsen Award, he had to forego the cash prize of USD 400,000 citing "unfriendly reception" by the people, in the face of protests from various quarters.

A similar scenario played out earlier in 2006, when Handke had to turn down Germany's Heinrich Heine prize after an outrage from the people, including members of Düsseldorf's town council—people who were responsible for administering the prize's cash award but threatened to veto the selection of Handke as the winner.

According to the Swedish Academy, Handke was selected as the winner "for an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience." The Academy further added that Handke's writing "shows and unending quest for existential meaning". One wonders: if awarding a writer for their "unending quest for existential meaning" was a criterion, then why had not Milan Kundera been not awarded the Nobel prize in all these years. If Kundera had been deprived of the much deserving Nobel prize for his

political views, then how did Handke manage to bag one? How about Borges?

There is an even bigger question at play here—one that has been debated in literary circles since the formation of the first such circle: Are the writer and the narrator two separate people? Is it even possible to separate the two, given one creates the other?

Literature is essentially about language, the language of the writer, with the help of which they form their ideas, and translate those ideas into books. This leads to another question: Is language separate form social reality? Is Handke's social reality of his sympathy for Milosevic and his irrational denial of genocide separate from his language and his works? Handke's "A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia"—in which he falsely tried to create a utopian image of Serbia—is the answer to all these questions.

The Swedish Academy in awarding Handke has committed multiple errors. It has insulted the memory of the thousands of people brutally killed in the genocide; and at a time when Islamophobia and far-right elements are alarmingly on the rise, the Swedish Academy has sent a very wrong message to the people—one that condones pro-genocide propaganda.

Alfred Nobel, in his will said that the award should be given to those writers who "have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction". Based on the said will, it is difficult to justify or even comprehend how a writer like Handke qualifies for the award, unless of course the Swedish Academy has decided that pro-genocide propaganda is the "ideal direction".

Tasneem Tayeb is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is @TayebTasneem.



Peter Handke at a rally just before the funeral for Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia in 2006.

PHOTO: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Punch
- 5 Role for Chris Hemsworth
- 9 Indian coin
- 10 Showed over
- 12 Seek a job
- 13 Chum
- 14 Colorful flowers
- 16 Acquire
- 17 Print units
- 18 Colorful flowers
- 20 Find appropriate
- 22 Savvy about
- 23 Foreword
- 25 Cross
- 28 Admits
- 32 Colorful flowers

DOWN

- 1 Flat on one's back
- 2 Stand against
- 3 Jail division
- 4 Typed, as text
- 5 Completely wreck
- 6 Fashion line?
- 7 Genesis
- 8 Show anger toward
- 9 Dance parties
- 11 "That's a lie!"
- 15 Snitch
- 19 Pirate's take
- 21 Fish features
- 24 Downsize, say
- 25 Twitch
- 26 Trattoria choices
- 27 Turkey's capital
- 29 Charlotte, for one
- 30 Kelp component
- 31 High homes
- 33 Small amounts
- 37 One of Donald's nephews
- 39 Tear

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