

Christians in northeast Syria fear Turkish invasion

Turkey apparently wants to rout the Kurds across the border, but Syriac population is in the middle.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan spoke at the dedication of a Syriac Orthodox church outside of Istanbul this past week. But is Erdoğan at the same time overseeing a military operation that could lead to the decimation of a Christian community in northeast Syria? That is the fear that many Christians, both in the Middle East and in the U.S., are expressing, as Turkish troops and military equipment mass along the border next to northeast Syria.

Their target seems to be Kurdish troops that, according to Turkey, represent a terrorist threat.

“Turkish leaders have vowed to destroy the Kurds, made up of more than 30 million people scattered over four nations and the world’s largest people group without a country,” wrote religion reporter Julia Duin at GetReligion.

It was the Syrian Kurds that helped defeat the Islamic State group on the battlefield after receiving U.S. equipment and training.

But, as Lara Seligman explains in Foreign Policy, Turkey charges that the mostly-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party militant group—the PKK—which both the United States and Turkey have designated a terrorist group.

Kurdish-led victories against the SDF have left them in control of much of the border area, a Washington Post article on Sunday pointed out.

The Kurds in the area are also guarding prisons full of ISIS fighters and argue that if they have to defend themselves against a Turkish invasion, they will no longer be able to hold the roughly 8,000 Syrians and Iraqis and 2,000 fighters from other countries.

If that’s not complicated enough, the area is home to tens of thousands of Christians. Conflict between Turkey and the Kurds could make them sitting

ducks, or force them to leave the area.

Sunday's WaPo article explained the U.S. proposal to Turkey includes a "joint U.S.-Turkish military operation to secure a strip south of the Syria-Turkey border that would be about nine miles deep and 87 miles long and from which the Kurdish fighters would be withdrawn."

Turkey has already rejected those parameters, insisting on a "safe zone" at least 20 miles deep and expressing a preference to control it alone. The Turkish government is also looking to establish areas that would allow the safe return of some of the more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

The 20-mile safe zone that Turkey wants would include many more Christian communities. And many of them are wary of the heirs of the Ottoman Empire, which slaughtered thousands of Armenians and Assyrians a century ago.

Source:

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