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Turkey - the empire strikes back

By GWYNNE DYER

The Ottoman Empire, like many of its Middle Eastern predecessors, had the bad habit of moving entire peoples around if they were causing trouble. And sometimes, as happened to the Armenians during the First World War, what started as deportation ended up as genocide.

The empire collapsed a century ago, but old habits die hard. Turkish President Recep Tayyib Erdogan (whose admirers often call him ?the Sultan') has a new plan: he's going to move a million Kurds away from Turkey's southern frontier with Syria, and replace them with a million Arabs.

And if his Western allies don't like that, he'll dump another million or so Arabs in Europe. ?Either this happens (in Syria),? he said last week, ?or we will have to open the gates (to Europe).? This is a blackmail threat with teeth: it was the sudden arrival of a million Syrian refugees in Europe in 2016 that energised extreme right-wing populists from England to Hungary.

Very few of those refugees ever wound up in either England or Hungary ? the great majority of them were given shelter in Germany ? but their arrival gave nationalists and racists all over Europe a stick to beat their opponents with. Erdogan, who is an accomplished nationalist rabble-rouser himself, knows exactly what he is doing, and he may well succeed.

All this is happening because Erdogan is obsessed about the Kurds ? or at least he knows that a lot of other Turks are obsessed about the Kurds, and he's in political trouble at home so he needs to feed their fantasies. You can never tell with the ?Sultan', who has a Trump-like ability to genuinely believe whatever he happens to be saying at the moment.

To be fair, the Kurds are a real problem for the Turks. They are about one-fifth of the country's population, concentrated mostly in the southeast, and they have been mistreated and their very identity denied by the Turkish state for so long that many of them would rather be independent.

Some of them have even taken up arms against Turkey in an organisation called the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which is now mostly based across the border in Kurdish-speaking northern Iraq. There was a ceasefire and peace talks early in this decade, but Erdogan started bombing the PKK again in 2015 when he had a tricky election to win and needed to appeal to Turkish nationalists.

Now he's in trouble again: his party lost control of all Turkey's big cities in the last election. Time to whack the Kurds again, and this time it's going to be the Syrian Kurds, another fragment of the Kurdish people that lives in northern Syria, just across the border from Turkey's Kurds. But not for much longer, if Erdogan has his way.

The Turkish strongman says that the Syrian Kurds are really ?terrorists' allied to the PKK, although there have been absolutely no attacks on Turkey from Syria during the entire eight-year Syrian civil war. What the Syrian Kurds were actually doing was defeating the real terrorists of ?Islamic State' in Syria, with strong air support and some ground support from the United States.

However, there is no gratitude in politics. Erdogan now wants to evict the Syrian Kurds from their homes and drive them south, away from the Turkish border. And to make sure they don't come back later, he wants to settle a million Arabs there permanently instead.

There are 4.5 million Syrian Arab refugees in Turkey. They'd like to go home, of course, but most of them are afraid of living under the control of Bashar al-Assad, the cruel dictator who has won the Syrian civil war. And here's that nice Mr Erdogan, offering them homes in a ?safe zone' in northern Syria.

That's not where their real homes are, but maybe they'll be happy there once Erdogan has driven the Kurds out. As he said recently

in Ankara, ?we can build towns there in lieu of the tent cities here.? The only hitch in the plan is that the United States may feel queasy about betraying the Syrian Kurds who fought alongside American troops to destroy Islamic State.

To solve that problem, Erdogan is threatening to send a million or so Arab refugees west into Europe. The Europeans will panic and make the Americans go along with his plan, or so he believes. He's probably right.

The European Union promised Turkey 6 billion euros to keep the Arab refugees in Turkey in 2016, but Erdogan claims that half of it was never paid (which, if true, was very stupid of the Europeans). He doesn't owe the EU any favours, and it truly will panic if he opens the gates and sends the Arabs west.

Donald Trump wants U.S. troops out of Syria before next year's election, so he'll probably give in to Erdogan (and the Europeans). But the Syrian Kurds will probably fight to protect their homes.