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Kurds' plight a result of failures all around: An elderly mother's anguish brings home the points about the wisdom of Canada's defence spending

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Simpson: Kurds' plight a result of failures all around

An elderly mother's anguish brings home the points about the wisdom of Canada's defence spending

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Kurdish Syrian civilians flee the town of Kobane on the Turkish border on Wednesday as Turkey and its allies continue their assault on Kurdish-held border towns in northeastern Syria. (Bakr Alkasem/AFP via Getty Images)

Article content

The lacklustre Canadian election campaign, combined with the looming Canadian winter exacerbated by climate change, could depress even the most stalwart Canadian. My elderly mother in Saskatoon has weathered 60 winters in Canada since landing in Montreal by boat. When another young woman she met suggested she head out to Saskatoon Sask., my mother set out for the west.

I think of similar Kurdish wives heading west, east, north or south — anywhere to get away from bombs and air strikes targeting towns along the 400-kilometre border between Turkey and the Kurdish-controlled region of Syria as Turkey's autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan fans out his troops to cleanse the area of Kurdish populations.

Syria's despotic President Bashar al-Assad has rushed in from the other direction to attack the incoming Turkish army, as well as the Kurds, who were America's strong ally against the terrorist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaida.

NATO's fight against terrorism will become even more difficult because ISIS has room to regain strength in the chaos. As Canada's Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland tweeted, Turkey's unilateral action risks reviving a battered Islamic State.

By pulling U.S. troops out of Syria, President Donald Trump allowed Turkey to carry out its long-planned attack on Kurdish forces in northeast Syria — unopposed even by its allies in NATO. The narrative at NATO headquarters in Brussels recites the time-worn line that the consensus rules of its North Atlantic Assembly tie the allies' hands in dealing with Turkey's incursion.

The allies' failure to act, despite the prospect of genocide and ethnic cleansing as well as other types of war crimes, is what international lawyers are talking about, as it seems the undemocratically elected Turkish leader is intent on systematically wiping out an ethnic group, deliberately and mercilessly.

The UN's 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide explains in Article II that genocide means killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of a national, ethnic, racial or religious group with the intent to destroy them in whole or in part. Arguably Turkey, and now Syria, are deliberately inflicting on the Kurdish group conditions of life calculated to bring about its "physical destruction in whole or in part."

Canada's response has been to belatedly impose future sanctions on military arms exports to Turkey.

Here in Canada we could have helped stop such war crimes if we had properly invested in the right kind of equipment, institutions and policies. Instead, the Liberal and previous Conservative governments have increased Canada's defence budget to buy war toys meant for high-intensity warfare.

The Liberal government's 2017 defence policy statement said it will increase annual defence spending from \$18.9 billion in 2016-17 to \$32.7 billion in 2026-27, an increase of more than 70 per cent over 10 years. At the same time, the government is making some of Canada's largest-ever military purchases

The government will provide \$17.5 billion to fund equipment for the Royal Canadian Navy over the next 20 years, including 15 surface combatant warships. The ship program, including associated costs such as training and ammunition, was originally budgeted in 2008 to cost \$26.2 billion. In 2017, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated the cost would be \$61.82 billion, almost 2.4 times more.

The Royal Canadian Air Force will acquire 88 new fighter jets at a cost of \$19 billion. The bid process has been bogged down for years by accusations that Lockheed Martin's F-35 stealth fighter has been favoured. Bids are expected by next year with the contract awarded in 2022.

So what is a Canadian voter supposed to do? Defence spending — and how to spend wisely and efficiently — has not been debated this election campaign. None of the leaders has talked about whether, and how, Canada should prepare for the full spectrum of missions — from peace support and peacekeeping to regional collective defence operations within and beyond Europe to high-intensity combat within and beyond North America.

Peace support and crisis management operations should become more central functions of Canada's defence. While some capability to conduct high-intensity combat operations should be retained for the sake of NATO's collective defence, the emphasis of Canadian force planning and structuring should be on greatly strengthening our ability and the UN's capability to conduct peace support missions.

Otherwise Kurds, who number at least 30 million including the diaspora in Canada, will watch in despair as their compatriots in Syria are slaughtered.

My mother fled the Russians on a cattle car with no possessions. Now she is on the telephone with me relentlessly, bewailing the plight of Kurdish mothers with no place to flee despite the oncoming winter's cold blasts.

Erika Simpson is an associate professor of international politics in the department of political science at Western University, the author of NATO and the Bomb and the president of the Canadian Peace Research Association.