

A Piece of Turkey Lies in the Middle of the Syrian Desert

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A little-known Turkish exclave, Caber Kalesi (Qal'at Ja'bar in Arabic), is a sliver of sovereign Turkish territory that sits smack in the middle of Syria.

Turkish-Syrian ties are slowly unraveling. Each day, thousands of Syrian refugees cross into Turkey, fleeing persecution. Ankara has been hinting that it will take action against Bashar al-Assad by setting up a safe haven across its border with Syria to protect civilians. On April 1, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the international community has to defend Syrian people's "right to self-defense."

With Syrian soldier firing across the border, wounding Syrian refugees as well as Turks, all eyes are on the Turkish-Syrian border for a potential confrontation between the two countries. Yet there is another area where Turkey and Syria meet: A little-known Turkish exclave, Caber Kalesi (Qal'at Ja'bar in Arabic), a sliver of sovereign Turkish territory that is smack in the middle of Syria. On April 4, Turkish daily *Today's Zaman* wrote about Caber Kalesi, drawing attention to its unique character as Turkey's only exclave.

Exclaves -- territories belonging to one country but completely surrounded by another -- are often the result of historical oddities. Caber Kalesi is a prime example of an exclave and a historically symbolic one, as well. This Turkish exclave, which I visited, lies on the east bank of the Euphrates River and is miles from Turkey proper. It serves as the burial site for the legendary Suleyman Sah (grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire).

Entering this exclave is a surreal experience. This is sovereign Turkish territory, and you need a passport to visit it even though it is smaller than a city block. The exclave is guarded by eleven Turkish troops, who stand at attention under a Turkish flag. Caber Kalesi lies in the middle of the Syrian Desert and has no permanent inhabitants.

This exclave came into being during the medieval period. The Turkic tribes, which originated from Central Asia, lived in what became Iran, Iraq and Syria for nearly five hundred years before deciding to settle in Turkey, between Europe and Asia.

Enter Suleyman Sah, leader of Turkish Oguz tribes in medieval Syria. When Suleyman Sah passed away in 1236, he was buried near his tribe's original territory, along the Euphrates River in Syria. However, Suleyman Sah's tribe soon left the area and continued their journey, crossing into Turkey, where they settled down. Suleyman Sah's grandson, Osman, set up a small principality in northwestern Turkey near Istanbul. This statelet soon grew into the Ottoman Empire (named after the House of Osman), eventually becoming a world power.

So it all started with Suleyman Sah. During the nineteenth century, Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II decided to honor this fact by building a tomb around Suleyman Sah's grave to honor the Ottoman ancestor.

With the outbreak of World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed, losing all its Middle East holdings, including Syria, which was conquered by the French. A modern Turkey emerged under Kemal Ataturk, who wanted the Turks to abandon their Ottoman heritage, but the lure of Suleyman Sah proved too powerful for even Ataturk to resist. He chose to embrace the Ottoman past in this unique case, insisting on keeping Suleyman Sah's grave in Turkish hands. The French acquiesced, and a 1921 treaty designated Caber Kalesi as sovereign Turkish territory and an exclave.

Syria gained its independence from the French in 1946, though Caber Kalesi remained as Turkish territory inside Syria. When the construction of the Tabqa Dam on the Euphrates River in 1973 risked the flooding of the exclave, Ankara and Damascus agreed to relocate Suleyman Sah's burial site to a higher elevation. Accordingly, in an incident that is rare even for exclaves, this piece of Turkish territory was moved from its original location upland to where it stands now, becoming the latest incarnation of Caber Kalesi, still surrounded by the Euphrates River and the Syrian Desert.

The exclave honoring the Turks' mythical ancestor was nearly forgotten by history until the Syrian uprising pitted Ankara and Damascus against one another.

Now, the presence of this unique Turkish exclave in the middle of Syria begs the following questions: Is Caber Kalesi Turkey's "Achilles' heel"? The exclave, guarded by only a few Turkish troops, can be easily overwhelmed by al-Assad's forces.

Or could that exclave become al-Assad's Achilles' heel? With nerves being so raw between Ankara and Damascus, a Syrian violation of the exclave's sovereignty could dent the Turks' imperial pride, leading them to call for action against al-Assad. Even Ataturk, who wanted to have nothing to do with the Ottomans, could not resist Caber Kalesi's call from a distant past.

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