

Turkey's Desultory and Dangerous Foreign Policy

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Summary: The rise of the Arab Spring, more particularly the Syrian civil war, and the ISIS offensive in northern Iraq has created a fresh crisis for Turkey. Al-Qa'ida-related groups have carried out several terror attacks in that country in the past and continue to do so. Based on this perspective, Turkey has already seemed more willing to work with the United States to marginalize al-Qa'ida-linked organizations. Turkey has also reportedly agreed to take part in a U.S.-led program to train vetted rebels in Qatar to marginalize jihadis in the Syrian opposition.¹ However, though Turkey has been seen as a beneficial partner in the fight to stabilize the region, its own agenda may be more suspect.

Issues: Turkey is the regional party most responsible for the emergence of a serious rebellion in Syria, but miscalculations about the regional and international environment, a narrow approach to handling the armed opposition, and failure by Turkey and its allies in the West and Middle East to manage their conflicting priorities have damaged Turkish interests in Syria. Turkey now effectively has two failed states on its southern border².

Turkey's Syria and Iraq policies, since the Syrian uprising, have been mainly driven by two concerns:

1) Unease over its Kurdish problem. After Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ceded control of strategic border areas to the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—a Kurdish group with links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—in retaliation for Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition, the PYD became Ankara's number one threat.³

2) The Assad regime itself. Turkey's government believes the cycle will be repeated even if ISIS is defeated. The revival of an Assad regime in Syria will foster a new rise of extremist groups, protecting his own stranglehold on power while the groups will only continue to present a fundamental threat to the West and their allies.⁴

Acting to address these problems, Turkey initiated two policies: The first was to begin working with the western powers, more particularly the United States. In August 2011, President Barack Obama became the first foreign leader to call on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power amid widespread anti-regime protests.

¹ <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/turkey-and-isis-challenge>

² http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Turkey_s_Syria_Predicament.pdf

³ <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/turkey-and-isis-challenge>

⁴ <http://www.businessinsider.com/fred-hof-us-turkey-relationship-on-isis-2014-10>

Pro- and anti-regime Syrians, Turkey, and other regional states mistakenly read this as a U.S. commitment to Assad's removal, whereas it apparently was meant to convey the president's preference, rather than his policy. Some media, analysts, and U.S. officials attributed the opposition's militarization largely under its mistaken assumption that the United States would come to its rescue. This assumption motivated Turkey to want to develop relations with the west, particularly with the U.S.

Turkey established cross-border rebel supply lines into northern Syria and hosted Syrian dissidents, defectors, and rebels. The latter's presence in Turkey and physical proximity to the war also made it sensitive to the insurgency's character, while allowing it to dominate many Syrian Arab and Turkmen-majority rebel groups.⁵

However, a raid by U.S. forces on an Islamic State safe house in Syria in the summer of 2015 gleaned large amounts of intelligence undeniably linking Turkey to the Islamic State. In recent months, accusations have been brought up over the true nature of Turkey's role in the affairs playing in Syria.

Documents seized from Islamic State headquarters in seven locations, including Kobane, reveal the deep relationship Turkey has with fundamentalist groups that include al-Qaeda and ISIS. The documents show that chemical and explosive materials were transferred from Turkey to Syria.

Thus, Turkey has been playing a duplicitous game with the West. As reported by Clarion Project, Turkey's arms transfers to al-Qaeda-linked Islamist jihadis in Syria have long been documented. ISIS fighters from all over the world were given passage through Turkey to Syria.

It has also been reported by Kurdish news sources that as early as 2013 ISIS fighters have used the Istanbul and Adana airports and have received permits from the Turkish government to reside in Turkey until they cross over to Syria. Those documents have included bus tickets, electronic Turkish visas, residency permits, and documents with stamps from Turkish immigration officials. Chillingly, the documents show that chemical and explosive materials were transferred from Turkey to Syria. One such document was signed by the manager of Istanbul's Police Foreigners' Department, Erkan Aydogu. Manuals in Turkish as to how to use these materials were also given to the jihadis.⁶

Where the United States has largely focused on managing the threat from jihadist groups, Turkey sought out and strengthened ideologically compatible partners that produced military results. Turkey, therefore, sought more committed and capable fighters already in place in Syria—usually Islamists linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, independent moderate Islamist or nationalist groups and hardline Salafi Islamist factions.⁷ When Syrian rebels led by al-Nusra

⁵ http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Turkey_s_Syria_Predicament.pdf

⁶ <http://www.clarionproject.org/analysis/secrets-and-lies-turkeys-covert-relationship-isis#>

⁷ http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Turkey_s_Syria_Predicament.pdf

captured the Armenian town of Kassab in Syrian government-held territory, it seemed that the Turks had allowed them to operate from inside Turkish territory.

At the same time that Turkey has shown a waffling policy towards ISIS and like groups, it has also been just as convoluted when working between U.S. objectives when they involve the Kurdish forces. Ethnic hostility and abuse between Turks and Kurds have now increased.

The police suppressed anti-ISIS demonstrations but left pro-ISIS demonstrations alone. Some 72 refugees who had fled to Turkey from Kobani were sent back into the town. Kobani, is a key location along the Turkish Syrian border and was a decisive factor in the war against ISIS in 2014.

How great a setback would it be for ISIS if it failed to capture Kobani? Its reputation for always defeating its enemies would be damaged, but it has shown that it can stand up to U.S. airstrikes even when its forces are concentrated in one place. Turkey chose to seal off the Kurds trapped in Kobani rather than supporting them leading to the detrimental situation.⁸

As late as February of 2016 the Turkish government has taken to conducting artillery shelling on areas now controlled by Kurdish forces. This act was done despite protests from NATO countries. This policy has been implemented in an attempt to halt the advancement of both Kurdish and Assad supporting Syrian forces that have been recently gaining ground. The introduction of Russia into this fray has only served to exacerbate the situation by creating even greater anxiety for Turkey as they see a strengthening Russia/Syrian alliance (Yoakov, 53).

Additional Considerations: Turkey's fears over the success of the Kurdish forces just over its borders are not unjustified. In reality they bring to light a deeper complication that has seemingly been overlooked in all the concern for combating ISIS and like groups.

For the west, Kurdish forces have proven to be the most capable forces combating Islamic fundamentalist forces on the ground and assisting U.S. strategic missions with viable intelligence. The most effective of these Kurdish groups is the People's Defense Units (YPG) and its political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The PYD is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which since 1984 has been fighting for self-rule for the 15 million Turkish Kurds. Like ISIS, the PKK combines fanatical ideological commitment with military expertise and experience gained in long years of guerrilla warfare. Marxist-Leninist in its original ideology, the PKK is run from the top and seeks to monopolize power within the Kurdish community, whether in Turkey or Syria.⁹

Although the PKK's terrorist activities have slowed since its most recent ceasefire with the Turkish Government, its members have continued to conduct terrorist attacks against civilian, military and other government targets in Turkey. PKK militants frequently attack military bases

⁸ <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n21/patrick-cockburn/whose-side-is-turkey-on>

⁹ <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n21/patrick-cockburn/whose-side-is-turkey-on>

and police interests, kidnap civilians and military personnel and sabotage infrastructure projects, including dams, gas pipelines and power plants. Over 50 people have been killed in PKK attacks since 20 August 2012, and the group is reported to have kidnapped more than 300 children between December 2013 and May 2014.

The PKK has also conducted attacks outside of this region, including in Turkey's capital, Ankara, and in its largest city, Istanbul. Since 2012, the PKK's activities have mostly consisted of bombings, kidnappings, armed assaults and attacks against infrastructure. This includes setting up roadblocks and checkpoints and acts of sabotage against dams and other infrastructure. The PKK maintains close links with its Iranian affiliate, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). Like the PKK, the PJAK has training camps in northern Iraq. Iran and Turkey are reported to have conducted probable coordinated military operations against both groups in their shared border areas.¹⁰

Turkey has had a long and complicated history with the Kurdish organization. Over the last quarter century both sides have tried and failed to come to a viable peace agreement often with the situation deteriorating back into a state of violence. Since the PKK began its campaign, more than 40,000 people have died. During the conflict, which reached a peak in the mid-1990s, thousands of villages were destroyed in the largely Kurdish south-east and east of Turkey, and hundreds of thousands of Kurds fled to cities in other parts of the country.¹¹

The fight against the PKK has spearheaded much of Turkey's foreign security agenda. It has also been a driving force in the tense relations Turkey has had with Assad regime. Abdullah Ocalan, a Turkish Kurd who discovered Marxism as a university student in Ankara in the 1970s, has led the PKK from its founding. Known to his supporters as "Apo," Ocalan lived mainly in Syria and Lebanon until October 1998, when the Syrians, feeling international pressure and fearing Turkish military action, forced the Kurdish rebels to leave.¹²

The allowance of PKK to reside led, in October 1998, to war clouds gathering over the Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey, in the middle of a grueling campaign against the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) in its eastern territories, accused Syria of supporting the Kurdish rebels, not least by hosting PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Damascus. This was the latest incident in a long history of uneasy relations between two neighbors.¹³

Turkey has also long been frustrated by the continued unwillingness of allies like the U.S. to be more aggressive in combating the PKK. As early as 2007, a well-oiled guerrilla force of some fifty thousand men and women, were at the time estimated to have a total strength of between

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<https://www.nationalsecurity.gov.au/Listedterroristorganisations/Pages/KurdistanWorkersPartyPKK.aspx>

¹¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20971100>

¹² <http://www.cfr.org/turkey/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk/p14576>

¹³ <http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR007/syria.pdf>

three thousand and five thousand fighters. Nonetheless, with cross-border rhetoric increasing, some analysts say the PKK reached a sort of equilibrium, thanks in part to its mountainous redoubts in northern Iraq, and the Bush administration's unwillingness to put pressure on Iraq to curb the group's attacks.¹⁴

Conclusion: Turkey's prime concern is not the current threat of fundamentalism in Syria, though they do have those concerns as well, but are more concerned about what will exist once the fundamentalists are defeated. As they see it, the fall of ISIS and such groups will most likely result in the re-emergence of the Assad regime to control most if not all of Syria and reignite the tense relations that are likely to follow.

What also concerns them and has to be negotiated is the position of the Kurdish movement and what it will look like coming out of this war. As these are the most effective armies fighting in Syria, it is inevitable that some form of autonomous Kurdish state will emerge in Syria and likely in a region that borders with Turkey. The most successful fighters are part of extended branches of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), and it is likely that any autonomous state that emerges is going to result in creating a serious threat to Turkey's own domestic security if not to an even greater regional threat.

The question that the U.S. should worry about is what will then be the strategy Turkey adopts if this scenario plays out? The likely concern is that Turkey will use the traditional response of direct military force into these autonomous zones and, by extension, Syria. The other possibility is that Turkey will decide to continue working through fundamentalist organizations to operate along a more proxy oriented war strategy. The former solution will be business as usual for the way Turkey has combated the Kurdish movement in the past. The latter conclusion assumes that they will bolster and support a group like ISIS over whom they will have at best a marginal degree of control. In either case the situation will open a new theater of instability if not prepared for and managed.

By extension the U.S. policy in trying to grapple with the Turkey-Kurdish conflict has been a wavering participation, confusing Turkey when not treating the PKK with a sense of honesty when first operating in Iraq. At the same time we confuse the Kurds by continually ignoring the aggressive military actions Turkey carries out across the border against them. Nor have we allowed them to be part of the negotiations that had been going on. (Yaakov, 2016).

The problem the U.S. and by extension the western powers have is their continued inability to grasp the complex and often convoluted political situation in the region. As such the U.S. and western powers have approached the problems by responding to the immediate issues without fully grasping the greater mechanics to understand the second and third order effects. This has served to embroil the west in one conflict after another; each time more complicated. In other words, the U.S. appears so desperate to resolve an immediate problem it often pursues a quick fix solution.

¹⁴ <http://www.cfr.org/turkey/inside-kurdistan-workers-party-pkk/p14576>

At this point the likely scenario that the U.S. should be preparing for is a return of the Assad regime to power. The help given by Turkey and other Sunni powers will certainly work to increase tensions. Though given the weakened state the Assad regime will be in, it is unlikely they will be inclined to engage in any activity that will provoke tensions with stronger neighbors. It's probable that the next few years will be devoted to stabilizing their own borders.

The problem will be the Kurds. As pointed out they will definitely emerge in a strong position from this conflict with more defined regions of autonomy. They are an organized military wing capable of engaging sizeable military units in actual confrontation. Coupled with the connections they have with the PKK, they will most certainly alarm Turkey and possibly other countries dealing with Kurdish separatist movements. They could become more of a destabilizing force than they already are.

Recommendations: The West needs to do more than acknowledge that the Middle-East is a highly volatile region with a tense and complicated political situation that has the potential to ignite turmoil throughout the world. There are several destabilizing elements that are nearly impossible to understand from an outside perspective.

From this standpoint Western powers need to consider taking a step back from a frontline leadership viewpoint. There already exists a coalition of Sunni powers long allied with the U.S. and the west. Their primary concerns are the destabilizing force the Kurds present and in addition the threat of Iran's growing influence in the region. It might be more advantageous for the west to back this coalition and work from a position of indirect influence where they can have some control over the outcome and agenda but not be the lead.

In the long run the U.S. must realize that it cannot continue a reactionary policy in the way it handles this situation. Nor can it continue to be the lead in all the major actions being taken as it is embroiling itself ever further into the region's volatility. The best it can hope for in the long run is to back a coalition that it can work with and at best guide its agenda, but letting them take the lead. The West is never going to achieve the vision it set out to obtain so many years ago. However, it can try to create some balancing force that can reassert a degree of stability that the U.S. can at least work with.

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