The Paradigm Shift in Turkey's Syria Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Turkey's recent escalated involvement in the Syrian civil war marks a paradigm shift in Ankara's strategy towards Syria. An interplay of dynamics is driving this policy transformation. Turkey shares a porous border with Syria and has pursued a strategy of non-engagement towards ISIS, which is operating in and around the Syrian-Turkish border. Lately Turkey has been concerned with both the growing U.S.-Kurdish cooperation and territorial gains made by Kurdish militias inside northern Syria. Turkey sees this activity as a threat to its territorial integrity. Ankara has sought to restore a partnership with the U.S. in order to stifle a future Kurdish proto-state in northern Syria and separatism in Turkey. The shift in Turkey's policy towards cooperation with the U.S. will be beneficial for the U.S.-led coalition in its efforts to degrade and diminish ISIS. However, it also will be costly for the U.S.' relationship with Kurdish militias, as Turkey seeks to contain and constrain their gains in Syria and inhibit their cooperation with the West.

ANALYSIS

Introduction

Syria has been embroiled in a four-year protracted multi-sided civil war. The state has suffered from huge internal displacement. More than seven million citizens have been dislocated, and over four million have fled the country (UNHCR, 2015). Both in Iraq and Syria, the United States (U.S.) has been engaged in a counterinsurgency campaign against the proto-caliphate, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Despite being systemically and militarily overstretched, ISIS maintains relative strategic depth in both Syria and Iraq. Turkey is an important member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and shares a long porous border with Syria and ISIS-held territory. This has made Ankara both a crucial player in regional events, and vulnerable to the destabilising effects of the Syrian conflict. However, Turkey has had a complex and controversial strategy towards Syria and ISIS that has directly complicated the U.S. mission against ISIS.

Seemingly, there is a divergence in U.S.-Turkey priorities and strategic interests in relation to Syria. Since the beginning of the Syrian unrest, Turkey has maintained a regime-change strategy; it has both opposed and sought to depose the Bashar Al-Assad regime. Moreover, Ankara has turned a blind eye towards ISIS activities in Turkey and along its southern borders, in an effort to apply indirect pressure on the Assad regime and the Syrian Kurdish militias (Kozak, 2015). Conversely, U.S. priorities have been centred exclusively on degrading and diminishing ISIS. Turkey has been a reluctant ally in the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS, and has refused to provide the U.S. and coalition forces with access to strategic airbases on its territory. This has strained U.S.-Turkish relations and elicited international criticism of its strategy.

On July 24, 2015, Turkey made a significant shift in its policy towards Syria, as the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that Turkey's warplanes would partake in the international coalition against ISIS in Syria (Hurriyet, 2015). Further, the proclamation continued, Ankara would allow the U.S. to launch airstrikes against ISIS from Turkey's Incirlik Air Base.

This development is the culmination of prolonged negotiations between Washington and Ankara. The steps towards formulating an agreement took place on July 7, with the arrival of a senior U.S. delegation. Ankara's security concerns escalated on July 20, following an ISIS-linked suicide bombing attack in Suruç,

Turkey. Two days later the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) claimed responsibility for a series of reprisals against the Turkish government, which the PKK claimed were a punitive response to Ankara's lax security measures that allowed for the Suruç attack. The outbreak of escalatory violence in Turkey led to U.S. President Barack Obama, and Turkish President Recep Erdogan, concluding the negotiations on July 22 through a private telephone conversation. Ankara held a special security meeting on July 23 (Zaman, 2015), and on July 24, Turkey started bombing ISIS positions in Syria, PKK positions, and carried out extensive domestic anti-terror raids – arresting hundreds of alleged ISIS and PKK members.

Subsequently, Turkey invoked Article Four of NATO's founding treaty to discuss the Turkey-Syria border crisis. Article Four obliges member states to "consult together whenever, in the opinion of any of them, the territorial integrity, political independence or security of any of the Parties is threatened" (NATO). NATO held such a meeting on July 28 to discuss the threat ISIS posed to Turkey and Ankara's measures against ISIS and the PKK. The discussions were largely symbolic. The meeting ended with NATO members showing strong solidarity with Ankara over its new anti-terrorism campaign. Unverified rumours of plans by the U.S. and Turkey to establish a "safe zone" in Syria emerged at this time. These speculations were disproved by U.S. officials and largely stemmed from Turkey's rhetoric and a misinterpretation of the Turkish Foreign Minister's comment of "natural safe zones" emerging in regions cleared of ISIS (Sayigh, 2015; Rogin, 2015).

The dynamics driving Turkey's shift in policy

The motives for Turkey's policy shift are convoluted and interlinked. Firstly, the ISIS-linked bombing attack in Suruç exemplified Turkey's increasing insecurity along its porous border. Turkey's previous strategy had been to resist engagement in order to ensure domestic security and stability (Tziarras, 2015a). The combination of ISIS and PKK attacks in southern Turkey have unravelled the viability of this strategy. Consequently, the growing insecurity Turkey faces has made it difficult for Ankara to resist both domestic and international criticism, and pressure to engage against ISIS (Al-Masri, 2015; BBC, 2015).

Secondly, Turkish passivity towards Syrian jihadist elements has allowed extremist organisations to establish covert networks, create a deep infrastructure for radicals inside Turkey (Francis, 2015), and

to recruit and radicalise Turkish youth (Gurcan, 2015). The recent ISIS attack has highlighted the unsustainability of Ankara's idleness in the face of continued internal radicalisation, and the proliferation of the domestic terrorism threat (Shehadey, 2015).

The third dynamic underlying Turkey's policy shift is comprised of two intimately connected factors: increasing U.S.-Syrian Kurdish cooperation and the gains of Kurdish militias along Turkey's immediate periphery, supported by coalition airstrikes. For this reason, Turkey sees the Kurdish militias in Syria and northern Iraq as a greater threat than ISIS. Turkey has an uneasy reminder that U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in Iraq, from 2003 onwards, laid the foundation for a proto-Kurdish state in northern Iraq (Quilliam and Friedman, 2015). Turkey's refusal to assist the U.S. in the 2003 Iraq invasion fomented a U.S. partnership with the Iraqi Kurds, which empowered them significantly. Turkey's lack of participation in the coalition against ISIS similarly has produced an effective U.S.-Syrian Kurdish partnership. Recently, Syrian Kurdish militias supported by coalition airstrikes have seen increasing success and advances on the Syrian battlefield contiguous to Turkey's border. This may eventually allow them to carve out their own proto-state (called Rojava), by linking their three self-declared autonomous cantons in northern Syria. Subsequently, this may bolster Kurdish separatist movements in Turkey (Harbin, 2015). Ankara's policy shift is a high-risk strategy to stem the advance of Kurdish militias (Beiras, 2015), reduce U.S. coalition air support for these militias and confront ISIS, which Ankara now sees as more of a threat following the recent bombing in southern Turkey. The Turkish government has recently intertwined PKK and ISIS in a terrorism threat narrative to legitimise its actions aimed at inhibiting Kurdish expansion (Kozak, 2015). In fact, there is no nexus between ISIS and the Kurdish separatist movement, the PKK. They are very different organisations, though both challenge the political map of the Middle East with ambitions of creating and sustaining de facto sovereign entities. The conflicting territorial parameters of these ambitions have brought both organisations into active confrontation against each other.

The fourth dynamic is a domestic factor. On June 7, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), lost its outright parliamentary majority (for the first time in 12 years) due to a loss of Kurdish votes to the Kurdish party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) (Trofimov, 2015). In a state of intense domestic insecurity, participation in the anti-ISIS coalition may rally the nation around the government, reduce criticism of

its inaction, and reinforce Ankara's legitimacy as a bulwark against ISIS and other terrorist organisations. Turkey has also linked the PKK with the HDP (Trofimov, 2015). The government may use this connection to leverage against the HDP's recent gains to discredit the organisation and restore the AKP's parliamentary majority.

Implications of Turkey's policy shift

The PKK have fought for Kurdish autonomy since 1984, but for the past two years the PKK and Turkey have had a unilateral ceasefire and a fledgling peace process. Ankara's policy shift radically undermines that peace process. Turkey's expanded role in the anti-ISIS coalition airstrikes has been intertwined with a new sustained assault on the Kurdish PKK. Following recent events in Turkey, Prime Minister Erdogan recently stated that peace was impossible (Karadeniz, 2015). The PKK and various Kurdish activists have reiterated a similar sentiment (Nazish, 2015). Firmly interlinked with the intensifying tensions between Turkey and Kurdish organisations, Turkish actions may alienate the Syrian Kurds and distract the U.S. from the war against ISIS (Quilliam and Friedman). PKK and the Peoples' Protection Unit (YPG) – a PKK-affiliated group, are increasingly seen as the most

effective fighting forces against ISIS. The U.S. has relied heavily on the YPG and various Kurdish militias to make gains against ISIS (Harbin, 2015). Thus, Turkey's resumption of hostilities with the PKK and aggression towards Kurdish militant groups may impede the anti-ISIS coalition's operations against ISIS. Turkey's aim to stifle Kurdish gains is further embodied in the recent deal with the U.S. The accord stipulated that the U.S. would not be allowed to use Incirlik airbase, as a staging point for assisting Kurdish militias in Syria (Erkuş, 2015). This, consequently, further strains the alliance between the U.S. and Kurdish militias and the coalition's substantive efforts against ISIS. The intensification of Ankara's attacks against Kurdish militias in south eastern Turkey risks steering the country closer to civil war and expanding regional turmoil.

Secondly, a positive implication for the U.S.-led coalition efforts against ISIS is that Turkey's move to secure and bolster the border sections abutting ISIS territory will sever ISIS from key supply routes. This will also reduce the flow of foreign fighters into Syria – diminishing ISIS's ability to replenish its battlefield loses (Stratfor, 2015).

Thirdly, permitting the U.S.-led coalition to use Turkey's strategic air bases dramatically improves the air campaign operations against ISIS by greatly reducing

the distance travelled by coalition aircraft. This will allow the U.S.-led coalition to apply greater pressure against ISIS.

Fourthly, the intervention against ISIS may have domestic ramifications for Turkey. Ankara's deepening involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition likely will come at a cost – the country risks retaliation from ISIS.

Conclusion

Turkey has undertaken a paradigm shift in its military posture and policies towards Syria. The new Turkish policy is primarily aimed at a re-alignment with the U.S., in an effort to renew U.S.-Turkish relations, and diminish U.S.-Kurdish cooperation. Ankara sees the increasing prospect of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria as a growing threat to Turkey's territorial integrity. Consequently, Turkey's policy shift escalates tensions with the PKK and Kurdish organisations. This poses a challenge to Washington's alliance with these organisations, troublingly the most effective partners in the coalition's war against ISIS.

CONCLUSIONS FOR POLICY

1. Turkey must maintain a concerted effort against ISIS. Turkey must ensure and sustain a concerted effort against ISIS, and not distract or impede the U.S.-led coalition from its central tasks. Intertwined with this, Turkey's deepening involvement in coalition airstrikes against ISIS likely will elicit retaliatory strikes from the extremist organisation. Thus, Turkey must bolster its security and military presence along its southern border with Syria and Iraq.

2. Western states should pressure Turkey in the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The West must pressure Turkey into taking a proportionate response towards PKK attacks. Emphasis must be placed on deescalating the Turkey-PKK crisis, facilitating a ceasefire, and guiding both parties back to the peace process and reconciliation. Reducing tensions arising between Turkey and the Kurds will help contribute to regional stability.

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