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Shifting the Balance against ISIS, or Why Turkey Changed its Mind

By: Dr. Zenonas Tziarras*

When the international anti-ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham) coalition was formed back in September 2014, Turkey was thought to be a pivotal participant. However, the international initiative divided Turkey's political scene which appeared reluctant to follow in the footsteps of its traditional ally, the United States (US). Even after October 2, 2014, when the Turkish parliament voted on a motion that would authorize the government to conduct operations in Syria and Iraq as well as provide Turkish soil and military bases for allied operations, Ankara kept resisting any kind of meaningful military engagement of ISIS. Not only that, but it seemed to be turning a blind eye on foreign fighters crossing into Syria through its borders.

Turkey's controversial stance became more evident when on October 13, 2014, it denied reports that it had granted the US access to the Incirlik air base for military attacks against ISIS. In the midst of this indecisiveness and reports of Turkish support to ISIS and other extremist groups in Syria, Turkey has over the past months become a cause of concern for the international community and brought back memories from 2003, when Ankara denied the US access to Iraq through its soil. Today, after dramatic developments in the country and the region, Ankara took the long-awaited decision to allow the US to launch military strikes against ISIS from its soil and notably from the Incirlik air base which Americans have thus far been using only for humanitarian and logistical purposes. The question that remains is, why has Turkey resisted engaging ISIS earlier and what prompted it to change its mind?

Resisting Engagement

Perhaps the most important reason why Turkey avoided a direct confrontation with ISIS was the maintenance of its domestic security and stability. Its close proximity to Syria and Iraq as well as its geographically bridging position between continents made it a natural crossing and entry point into Syria and Iraq for ISIS recruits. At the same time, its predominantly Muslim population became an important recruitment tank and propaganda target group for ISIS. Within a short period of time from its

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appearance in the summer of 2014, ISIS managed to establish an organized and complex recruiting network in Istanbul and other cities.ⁱ

Apart from recruits that were sent to Syria and Iraq to fight with ISIS, the result was the emergence of extremist clusters within Turkey itself that could conduct terrorist attacks at any time or retaliate had Turkey acquired a more active role in the anti-ISIS coalition.ⁱⁱ The same threat becomes increasingly salient because of the growing number of refugees – currently around two million people. Refugee camps can easily become safe havens for extremists that cross into Turkey as well as effective recruitment places.

Of course security concerns have not been the only causes behind Turkey's delay. Virtually every domestic pressure group was against a military incursion into Syria, regardless of the political or military goal. Opposition political parties, business groups, and the public opinion,ⁱⁱⁱ were all against a military escalation of the Syria and ISIS crisis; they did not want to see their country being engaged in a war. This was also one of the reasons why the Turkish incursion into Syria for the relocation of the Suleyman Shah tomb (a piece of Turkish sovereign land in Syria with historical importance)^{iv} was so surgical and fast. Against this background, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) could not put their political power at risk by getting more involved in the anti-ISIS coalition, especially with the 2015 national elections around the corner.

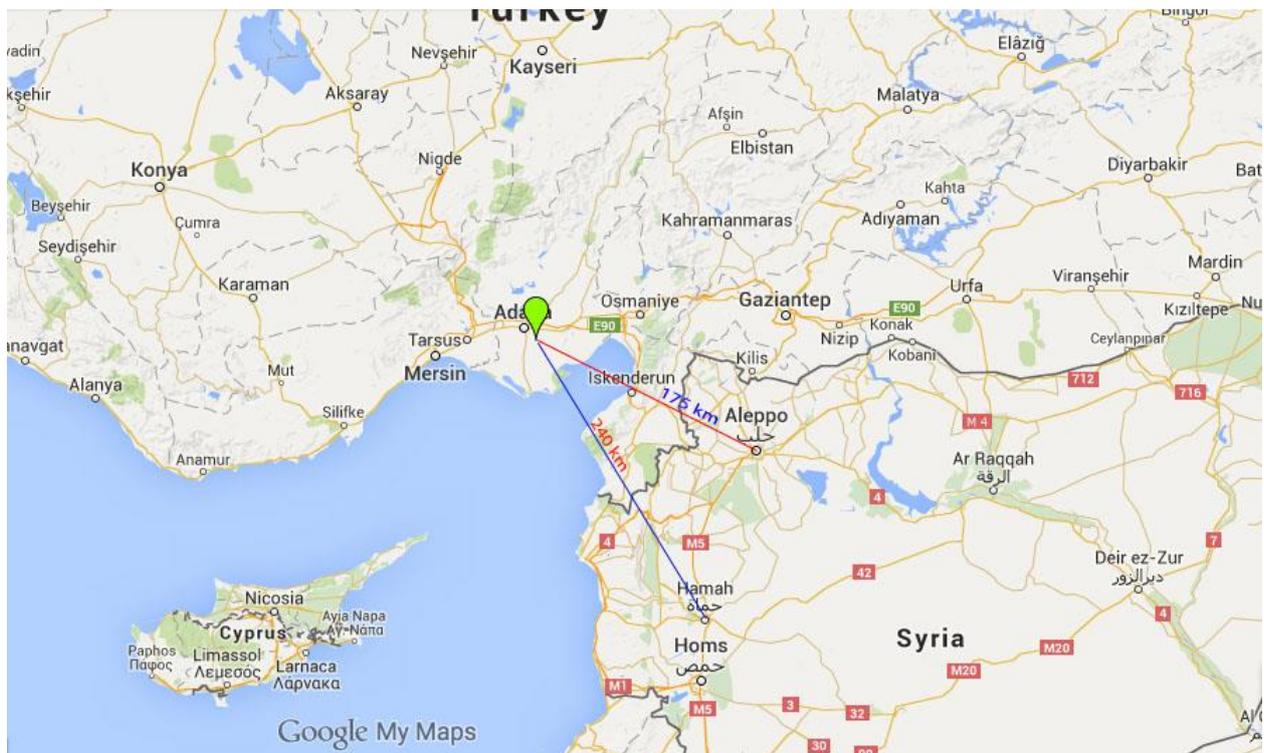
An equally important reason that could explain Turkey's stance was of strategic nature. Ankara's staunch refusal to engage ISIS coincided with the fierce fighting between ISIS and the Kurds, particularly over Syria's Kurdish-majority town of Kobani, at the Turkish-Syrian border. Because the US was not willing to grant Ankara's conditions for participating in the coalition (i.e. a no-fly zone over Syria, a buffer zone inside Syria and the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad), it seems that Turkey supported, via its non-involvement, an all-against-all war of attrition thereby working toward weakening the Assad regime, ISIS and the Kurds.^v

Change of Course

Since then, Turkey has been taking certain half-measures, such as training (moderate Islamic) opposition groups, in an effort to appease both its Western partners and domestic opposition parties that have been blaming the government for supporting ISIS. It was not until mid to late July 2015 that Turkey made a decisive move against ISIS. Not only did it allow the US to use the Incirlik air base (see map below), but it

also conducted anti-ISIS airstrikes in Syria even as it raided locations of suspected ISIS, Kurdish and leftist militants.^{vi} This change in policy had a number of drivers.

To begin with the Kurdish issue, Turkey's unwillingness to help the Kurds of Kobani against ISIS had a backlash against the government domestically as Kurdish protests erupted throughout the country. As such, the Kurdish peace process, and by extension Kurdish electoral support of the AKP, was put in danger as it was clearly reflected in the June 7, 2015 national elections where the pro-Kurdish party HDP got 13% of the votes for the first time in Turkish history. Soon after that, Turkey's policy took another hit when Kurds won the battle for Kobani thus strengthening their presence along the Turkish-Syrian border - what is called Syrian or Western Kurdistan. The Kurdish victory meant that from now on Turkey should take (Syrian) Kurds seriously into account, for they constitute a significant regional factor that could well threaten Turkey's territorial integrity as well.



The Incirlik air base will prove to be a major asset in the US air operations against ISIS as it is much closer to the targets than other bases used thus far. This allows fighter jets to spend more time on the actual operation instead on travelling to or from the target as well as quicker operational reaction based on new intelligence.



From this perspective, and since ISIS failed to stop the Kurds, a change in strategy was imperative if Turkey wanted to prevent the consolidation of the Syrian Kurdistan. Its greater involvement in Syria may well be followed by the establishment of a buffer zone on the Turkish-Syria border (as was its initial condition for taking action) which would work as a buffer for both ISIS and the Kurds. Though we cannot know for sure, something like that could be a part of a give-and-take between Turkey and the US. On another note, it should be mentioned that the Turkish government is more justified and legitimized to take action at this juncture since its actions were taken right after an ISIS suicide attack in Turkey that killed 32 and wounded 104 people and the first cross-border exchange of fire between the Turkish military and ISIS. In this regard, it is no longer only in theory that ISIS constitutes a domestic national security threat.

Within this framework, the Turkish government's decision to take action after these events also creates a "rally 'round the flag" effect by which the government and specifically the President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, gains popular support. To be sure, these developments are directly related with the domestic social, political and economic instability that emerged since early June due to the inability of the political parties to form a coalition government after the national elections. The country seems to be headed to snap elections where the AKP will need all the votes it can get to regain its parliamentary majority,

The next reason is related with the broader Middle East geopolitical environment, its balances of power and Turkey's role within it. The recent deal between West's P5+1 and Iran over the latter's nuclear program is a highly significant development that will have a great impact on the international politics of the Middle East. It essentially seals the return of Iran to international affairs, which also means the strengthening of Iran and the increase of resources that it will be able to dedicate to the pursuit of its geopolitical goals.^{vii} A side-effect of Iran's empowerment would be the increase of Assad's resilience. Moreover, Tehran has already claimed a central, if downplayed, role in the fight against ISIS. At the same time, Iran's rival but West's ally, Saudi Arabia, is becoming more assertive while, for the time being, its recent attempt to militarily counter the coup by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen seems to be successful.



In this light, Turkey's change of course is also a response to the shifting balances of power in the region and to fears that it will lose its role and importance as a western ally and a pivotal state in the Middle East.

Epilogue - A New Paradigm?

Most of the drivers behind Turkey's policy point to a rather defensive stance. Yet, it should be remembered that Turkey has been looking for a way to overthrow Assad since late 2011. The current conjuncture feels like the perfect storm of events that could push Turkey toward that revisionist and thus offensive goal. At the same time, it creates the necessary conditions on the domestic and international level for this policy change to be tolerated, if not accepted. Perhaps most importantly, it allows Turkey to mend fences with the US even as it takes advantage of its role and operations to accomplish its own goals. Because of the nature of this complex dynamic a new Turkey-US and Turkey-Iran friction in the near future is very likely, especially if Turkey's efforts to overthrow Assad bear fruits.

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ⁱ <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/09/19/exclusive-how-istanbul-became-recruiting-ground-islamic-state-269247.html>.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/daloglu-isis-syria-iraq-istanbul-gathering-islamic-state.html#>; <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/turkey-salafi-radicalization-on-the-rise.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-isis-survey-anti-isis-coalition.html#>.

^{iv} <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/why-did-turkey-invade-syria-dig-grave-suleyman-shah>.

^v <http://da.unic.ac.cy/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Turkey-and-Saudis-in-Syria.pdf>.

^{vi} <http://www.newsweek.com/has-turkey-joined-anti-isis-coalition-counter-kurds-275256>;
<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/turkish-fighter-jets-pound-isis-positions-syria-150724045652504.html>.

^{vii} <http://thegwpost.com/2014/10/01/the-rise-of-iran/>.