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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# Turkey's Difficult Choices in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | Feb 2016

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## Introduction

With the aid of Russian air cover and support given by the Iranian militia cooperating with it, the Syrian regime has been able to cut off the opposition supply lines which tie the western quarters of Aleppo to Turkey via the town of Azaz, effectively besieging the rebel-held part of the city. In tandem with this, Kurdish forces have continued their march westwards from Afrin, taking the Menagh air field and Tell Rifaat, bringing them within 20 kilometers from the Turkish border. These developments have posed a considerable challenge to Turkey's strategic aims in the Syrian conflict.

In the event that the Syrian regime, alongside the PYD-led Kurdish forces, are able to capture the territory around the Mari-Tell Rifaat-Azaz axis, this would not only lead to the end of Turkish power in Northern Syria, but also the consolidation of autonomous Kurdish-held areas on both sides of the Euphrates. Ultimately, this greatly increases the prospects for a self-declared Kurdish state along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Opinions vary on whether Ankara is able to defy and deal with Russian challenges, especially since Russia has come to regard itself as the primary arbiter of events in Syria.

## Shifts in Turkey's Position on Syria

Turkey's fate is closely linked to the evolution of the conflict in Syria. The two countries, which share more than a 900 kilometers border, are deeply tied economically. Further, a prospective collapse of the Syrian state would serve to heighten sectarian and ethnic tensions for groups which live on both sides of the border with Turkey. This reality has driven Turkey to urge compromise, reform-based solutions to the Syrian conflict since the start of the revolution. All of Ankara's efforts, however, were rewarded by even greater violence, and the use of ruthless force on the part of the Syrian regime.

With the failure of international and regional forces to contain Syria's growing conflict, the Turkish government was compelled to take a firm stand in defense of the Syrian revolution. With time, and as the security, political, social and economic fallout of the Syrian crisis increasingly impacted Turkey, Ankara became more assertive in influencing the outcome of the conflict next door. The lack of a clear Turkish strategy to deal with the threats it faced, however, has grown abundantly clear. Turkey has now resorted to

reacting, often futilely and belatedly, to developments as they unfold, as became clear in the battles of Ayn Al Arab (Kobane) and Tell Abyad.

Other concerns have contributed to Turkey's complicated involvement in the Syrian conflict, primary of which is the worry of Turkey embroiling itself in a military conflict without international cover, and the complex set of relationships which bind Turkey with its neighbors, Russia and Iran – Turkey's main energy suppliers. This, in addition to the Turkish government's awareness of its electorate's reluctance to get involved in Syria. Combined, these factors led to Turkey's role being limited to keeping the balance of powers on the ground in check rather than establishing a new reality on the ground.

With the unrelenting crisis in Syria, Turkey's maximal aim became the formation of a safety corridor along the frontier which could serve to shelter fleeing refugees and provide breathing room for the Syrian opposition. Despite its stated desire to see this achieved, however, Ankara fell short of implementing this strategy, nor did it press the United States into bringing it to fruition. Even creating a sanctuary in Northern Syria now appears to be a moot point: since Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict, Washington's focus in Syria has shifted towards one of combatting "terrorists", with any direct involvement by Turkey in the conflict equating a direct confrontation with Moscow, and one in which it could not rely on support from NATO.

Turkey has since resigned itself to this reality, with Ankara eventually declaring its support for the Vienna Accord and UNSC Resolution 2254, two agreements which do not even meet the basics of the Syrian opposition's demands: removing Assad. Turkey has continued to provide the Syrian opposition with support but the levels of that support have considerably declined. With the growing unlikelihood of a political resolution favorable to the terms of the opposition, Turkey has steadily and consistently reduced the level of its expectations for what might happen in Damascus. Instead, the single main subject of Turkish intervention remains the Kurdish question.

## The Challenge of Aleppo

The latest round of fighting within the Aleppo Governorate in northern Syria have further threatened Turkey's aims in Syria. In addition to the advance of the Syrian regime forces in concert with their Russian and Iranian allies, the PYD, the armed wing of a political party (the Kurdistan Democratic Union Party) Ankara regards a terrorist group, has also seized territory. Instead of the security corridor it initially set out to achieve, Turkey now faces the prospect of being completely cut off from its allies in

other regions of North Syria, with a buffer region along the border controlled by Kurdish forces which are opposed to it.

Reflecting on these developments, two distinct schools of thought on how to deal with the Syrian crisis emerged within Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP). The first camp holds on to the necessity and even the urgency of establishing a safe corridor just on the other side of the border, regardless of the risks inherent in completing it, as a means to keep a buffer between Turkey and the Assad regime and its allies. Such a corridor would both give the Syrian armed opposition the breathing room it needs to survive, as well as prevent the formation of Kurdish autonomous areas of control.

A second group within the AKP maintains a sense of caution in becoming entangled in the Syrian quagmire, and urges that Ankara commit itself to purely diplomatic and political efforts to end the Syrian crisis. Turkey's actions on the ground have reflected a compromise between these two points of view, although the country has never risked the fallout of a direct involvement of its ground troops. In pursuit of this compromised strategy, Turkish artillery were forced to bomb Syria starting from February 13, when Kurdish forces advanced on and captured the town of Ain Diqna on the border. At this stage, Turkey has squarely aimed at a set of targets including the Ming Airport and the Deir Jamal region in the north of the Aleppo Governorate. Calling on Kurdish forces to pull back, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu justified these actions, claiming that his country's military was returning fire, in line with its rules of engagement, in the Azaz district of the Aleppo Governorate<sup>1</sup>.

## International Positions and Prospects for Change in Turkish Policy

Most countries have reacted with caution to Turkey's reactions to incidents in northern Syria. Washington explicitly demanded that both Turkey and the PYD end their cross-border fighting<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, the French government has also forcefully demanded that Turkey end its bombing of targets in northern Syria in a press statement in mid-

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<sup>1</sup> See "Turkey Shells Kurdish-held Airbase in Syria's Aleppo", *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2016: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/turkey-shells-kurdish-held-airbase-syria-aleppo-160213160929706.html>

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Daily Press Briefing of the US State Department, February 13, 2016: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/252624.htm>

February, putting Turkey's shelling of Kurdish military targets in the Aleppo Governorate on the same footing as the regime's shelling of civilians across Syria. France stressed again that the focus during this coming period should be the combatting of ISIL and a cessation of hostilities in Syria.

What reactions from Paris and Washington reflect is the massive sea change in world opinion towards the Syrian conflict. Although it continues to assert rhetorically that it supports Turkey's right to defend itself, the Obama Administration is clearly not eager to see any sort of escalation of Turkish military involvement along the border with Syria. The White House fears that such involvement could lead to a direct confrontation between the Russian and Turkish militaries, or otherwise divert resources from the struggle against ISIL, of which the PYD is a main component. Not only does it seem unlikely that Washington would support the formation of a Turkish-backed security corridor in northern Syria, but the US is likely to warn the Turks that NATO is not bound to defending Turkey in the event that it willingly enters a military adventure in Syria.

The end result of these domestic and foreign restrictions to any firm action by the Turkish government in Syria, and given its resolution not to allow Russia and its allies in Syria (including, mainly, the PYD) from achieving their aims of removing Turkey as an actor in the Syrian conflict, Ankara is attempting a number of distinct but complementary solutions in parallel:

- Turkey will continue to shell the areas held by the PYD, to prevent these Kurdish forces from advancing towards the border near Azaz, at least until some kind of reconciliation can be achieved. Equally, however, Turkey will seek to avoid being drawn into a conflict with Russian forces in Syria.
- Turkey will seek to enhance the level of its cooperation with Saudi Arabia, and continue to build international backing for a limited ground campaign in northern Syria. Such a campaign would be justified in terms of the wider global effort to fight terrorism and ISIL, and to establish safe zones which can shelter Syrian refugees, thus alleviating the burden placed on Turkey and, in turn, Europe. Recent German support for this proposition is likely to result in greater support for such an idea Europe-wide<sup>3</sup>. In the event that Russia is shown to be playing a ruse with regards to supporting a political solution to the Syrian crisis,

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<sup>3</sup> See, "Merkel says supports some kind of no-fly zone in Syria", *Reuters*, 15 February 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-merkel-nofly-idUSKCN0VO1ZH>

that would likely lead also to increased pressure on the Obama Administration to support such direct action.

- Turkey will seek to address anew the balance of powers on the ground between the regime and the opposition by seeking to upgrade the level of military and political support which the Syrian opposition based in the North (mainly the Aleppo Governorate) receives. Turkey will also seek to build capacity on the part of the High Negotiations Committee.

Ankara's use of force to confront the encroachment of PYD fighters to its borders is the proof that Turkey's choices become more difficult and stark with every passing day. While the main bases which define Turkish policy towards Syria have remained unchanged, they continue to be reliant on an interconnected mesh of global and regional factors. It is the lack of a clear Turkish strategy to deal with the developments on the battleground in northern Syria that makes Turkish action more complicated.