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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

US–Turkish Concord: Implications for Syria

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2015

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Introduction

After nearly a year of intense deliberations, punctuated by outbursts of open tension, Turkey has agreed to allow the United States military the use of its airspace and military bases in Incirlik and Diyarbakir, as part of the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In return, the US has approved the establishment of a de-facto security corridor stretching from Jarabulus on the Syrian-Turkish frontier for a distance of up to 100 kilometers westwards, towards the Mediterranean. This new security corridor extends as far as 50 kilometers into Syrian territory. A July 21 suicide bombing carried out by an ISIL member, who was both a Kurd and Turkish citizen, against a Turkish military target in the border town of Suruc provided Ankara with the *casus belli* it needed to begin an immediate military campaign against ISIL targets. Additionally, Turkey will have free rein to counter the threats posed to it by the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) operating out of Syrian and Iraqi territory. As part of this campaign, Turkish planes have bombed PKK targets in Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region for the first time in three years.

Factors Driving the Change in Ankara's Position

Since the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014, Turkey has obstinately refused American requests to join the military efforts of the international coalition against ISIL, formally established in September of the same year, or even to allow its airspace and military bases to be used as part of the coalition's campaign. Turkey's refusal exacerbated the problem faced by the US and its allies in their battle against ISIL, with international forces reliant on air bases located as far afield as Bahrain, instead of NATO bases on Turkish soil a mere 300 km away. As a consequence, the Islamist group's forces have been able to outpace the coalition, with its supply chains and convoys evading bombardment. This in itself was a reflection of a deep, fundamental disagreement between Ankara and Washington about the nature of the conflicts presently underway in Iraq and Syria, and the means of resolving them.

For its part, Turkey has declined to be a part of the military alliance against ISIL unless this forms part of a wider approach to resolving regional crises, including the dismantling of the Syrian regime headed by Bashar al Assad. According to this view, the emergence of ISIL is only one symptom of a much broader malady, one with Assad's rule at the center. Ankara therefore placed three preconditions on its involvement in any operations against ISIL:

- 1) no restrictions placed on strikes against the Syrian regime
- 2) a "security corridor", including a no-fly zone, is established in Syrian territory
- 3) the "moderate" Syrian opposition is armed and trained to fight both the Syrian regime and ISIL

The Obama administration, meanwhile, was preoccupied with negotiations with Tehran over the country's nuclear program and opted to avoid confrontation with the Iranians at the expense of long-time NATO ally, Turkey. Indeed, Washington ignored Turkish objections by practically adopting as an ally the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—an affiliate of Turkey's own PKK. The group, which had previously been regarded as a terrorist organization by both Turkey and the US, was able to rely on American logistical, military and financial support to evict ISIL forces from Kobane, Tel Abyad and Al Hassaka.

American military actions ultimately strengthened the PYD on the ground, allowing the group to benefit from a territorial continuity across its previously dispersed strongholds in Qamishli and Kobane. The PYD was emboldened enough to consider capturing the areas surrounding Aleppo to the east and north, extending out to Afrin, making the group's ambitions of a "self-governing zone" – an effective Kurdish canton along the length of the Syrian-Turkish frontier – a more feasible reality. The rise of the PYD as a political-military force within Syria's borders has also led to a frenzied revival of Kurdish nationalism within Turkey's Kurdish population. This was reflected in the results of Turkey's last legislative elections in June, when a majority of the Kurds in southeastern Turkey voted for the People's Democratic Party (HDP), thus taking the pro-Kurdish group past the electoral threshold and into parliament for the first time.

Throughout the past year, Turkey has been a keen observer of the fighting between the PYD and ISIL, a war of attrition that has depleted both sides' capabilities. The fall of Azaz, a vital crossing point for Syrian rebels into Turkish territory in the middle of May, and the capture of Tel Abyad by Kurdish fighters a month later, intensified Turkish fears of having to deal with separate ISIL and Kurdish bases of power, and altered Ankara's calculus.

Taken together, these realities expedited conciliation between the US and Turkey, with both countries opting to achieve some of their aims through cooperation. The US gains invaluable Turkish intelligence and military support in the fight against ISIL, while Turkey gains the chance to finally confront Kurdish aspirations of independence. Additionally, the creation of a security corridor will allow Turkey not only to equip and

train Syrian rebels unaligned with ISIL, but also to provide a hosting ground for tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, relieving some of the security and economic strains inside Turkey.

Turkish Intervention and Repercussions for the Syrian Conflict

An assessment of the impact of Turkey's military intervention in the Syrian conflict, currently limited to aerial and artillery bombardment, would be premature. Undoubtedly, however, Turkey's actions will have far-reaching consequences that influence all of the major players in the Syrian conflict, as described below.

ISIL

The Islamist group will likely have the most to lose from Turkish military action against its positions, for a number of reasons:

- ISIL is expected to lose large tracts of strategically important, even vital, land across the entire length of the Syrian-Turkish frontier. The towns and cities ISIL is likely to lose include important dams, electric power stations, workshops, factories, and farms, isolating the group within the Syrian Desert and the barren east of the country. This will spell the end of ISIL's declared aim of establishing an Islamic Caliphate with capitals in both Mosul and Aleppo.
- ISIL will lose its present territorial continuity, which allows it to remain active in areas spanning Turkey, Syria and Iraq. This also means the loss of its most precious lifeline: the droves of zealous foreign fighters who enter its territory via Turkey, as well as the smuggling networks which provide it with funding, and which allow ISIL to transport Syrian crude oil from the fields near Deir ez Zour to consumers in Turkey.
- Turkey's permission for coalition aircraft to use its bases and aircraft to strike at ISIL targets, and Ankara's own participation in these sorties, mean that ISIL's positions, unable to withstand a long-term war of attrition, will be under constant attack. With the benefit of Turkish airbases for refueling, coalition planes can much more easily pummel ISIL targets. The coalition will also be better able to monitor ISIL positions and expand its bank of targets.
- Turkish military action against ISIL is not likely to remain limited to Syria, and instead will expand into Iraq. Specifically, it is likely that Turkey will train local

tribal elements in the north of Iraq to work alongside its own air force to expel ISIL from the governorate of Nineveh, where its self-declared capital of Mosul is located.

The Syrian Regime

While Turkey's precondition of attacking the Assad regime in return for joining the international coalition against ISIL was not formally met by the US, the door is nonetheless left open for such future action. Turkish officials have publicly stated three separate objectives for their military actions: combatting "Kurdish terrorist organizations"; combatting ISIL; and "establishing democracy" in their regional neighborhood. Additionally, a secure corridor along the Syrian-Turkish frontier will be free not only of ISIL fighters and Kurdish separatists, but also Syrian regime forces, too. This will have an effect on the Syrian regime's forces in the environs of Aleppo, presenting the Syrian regime with a stark choice: evacuate its forces from the areas in the declared security corridor, or risk a direct confrontation with the Turkish military that would in turn create the possibility of an expansion of Turkey's military objectives.

A potential consequence of Turkey's military actions is that the withdrawal of ISIL from the territory it controls around Aleppo may force the group to direct its forces onto the frontlines with Syrian regime forces. Finally, Turkey's membership of the international coalition against ISIL will finally do away with any fantasies which the Assad regime harbored of joining the international coalition against terrorism.

The Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The way in which Turkey has thrown its full political and military weight behind the international coalition against ISIL has led to a diminished role for the PYD forces and other Kurdish militia in Syria, who had previously enjoyed a privileged position as partners of the Western powers seeking to destroy ISIL. This will prevent the group from expanding its present gains, consolidating their presence, or from forming a relationship with the US. Turkish strikes against PYD forces have even driven the party's leader, Saleh Musallam, to invite the Syrian regime's forces back into the areas which his party controls, provided that this is done "with a new mindset".

The Syrian Opposition

Finally, the armed battalions of the Syrian opposition are likely to be a major beneficiary of Turkey's military action, which has removed the existential threat of Syrian regime forces from the environs of Aleppo. Freed from having to face the constant threat of

ISIL forces, the armed opposition will now be able to more effectively challenge the Syrian regime. A weakened PYD, as explained above, will also benefit the armed Syrian opposition, which presently has to defend its strongholds to the north of Aleppo from a potential proxy of the Syrian regime that stands accused by various Syrian opposition forces of coordinating its strikes against the Syrian opposition with Iran and the Syrian regime.

In political terms, the Syrian National Coalition holds out hopes that the creation of a no-fly zone and security corridor would allow for it to establish a physical presence within Syria's borders, and for a caretaker Syrian government to oversee relief and humanitarian efforts for Syrians living along the frontier with Turkey.

Conclusion

Turkey's future interventions in Syria will be governed by domestic considerations, most significantly the composition of the present coalition government, or the results of a potential decision by the leading AKP to head to the polls early. Ultimately, the question concerns what kind of political price the Turkish government will pay domestically for its actions against ISIL in Syria, which is itself related to the regional and global players opposed to Turkey's parallel aims of toppling the Assad regime and attacking Kurdish separatist movements. It will also rely on the extent of common ground between the US and Turkey with regards to the maximum amount of tolerable change in the Middle East, particularly in Syria.