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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Motives for Turkey's Military Intervention in Syria

Policy Analysis Unit | September 2016

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

Following a prolonged period of hesitation, Turkey decided to militarily intervene in Syria. On the morning of August 24, 2016, Turkey dispatched tanks and special forces backed by air support to bolster the Syrian opposition offensive against the border town of Jarablus. Immediately after the town's capture by ISIL, Turkey issued an ultimatum to the Syrian Democratic Forces – the backbone of which is made up of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the Syrian affiliate Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK), which Ankara regards as a terrorist organization– giving them three days to withdraw to the east of the Euphrates river. This followed the YPG's own success, with air cover from the international coalition, in retaking the strategically important town of Manbij from ISIL. What has suddenly spurred Turkey to intervene directly in Syria now? And why did Turkey wait so long?

Control Over the Turkish Army

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, Turkey's policy in Syria has been marked by hesitation and indecision. Today, it has become clear that this hesitation was predominantly linked to the stance of Turkey's military establishment and its relations with the AKP government. The fact that Turkey's Second and Third Armies armies—the units responsible for defending Turkey's southern and eastern borders with Syria, Iraq, and Iran—took part in Turkey's failed July 15 coup goes some way in explaining the background to Turkey's reluctance to intervene directly in Syria. It transpires that the army had previously resisted all the government's requests to intervene in the Syrian conflict on the pretext that it could not do so without American support or cover from NATO, requirements made impossible by Russia's military intervention in Syria, beginning in September of 2015. The failed coup attempt and the popular and political reactions to the bloodshed it caused, have provided President Erdogan with the opportunity to purge the army and assert his control over it. The recent military operation in Syria is significant evidence that the elected Turkish government is now in a better position to command the army and bringing it line with government policy and thinking.

Growing Security Threats from Syria

Making use of popular discontent at the growing security threats posed by ISIL and the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), the Turkish government has launched a military operation aimed at stopping the campaign of bomb attacks on Turkish soil being orchestrated from Syria. The latest military operation was the government's response to attempts to make it look vulnerable and to dispel any impression that it was too preoccupied with dealing with the fallout of the failed coup and thus unable to respond in the interim. The intervention also gained legitimacy as an act of self-defense against the threats of ISIL and the PKK.

Weakness of the US Position

The Obama administration's reaction to the failed coup attempt was tepid, as was its response to Turkish demands, in particular for the extradition of Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania. The Turkish government went as far as threatening to reconsider its security and military alliance with Washington if Gulen was not extradited. Unable to extradite Gulen to Turkey without an order from a US court, Washington chose to give Turkey a free hand to take on both ISIL and the Kurds in areas to the west of the Euphrates, fearing that the alternative would be to lose the alliance of Ankara. Notably, Turkey's military operation began the morning that US Vice-President Joe Biden arrived in Turkey, when he called upon the YPG to withdraw to the east of the Euphrates, or possibly lose the American support they had received to the west of the river when ousting ISIL from Manbij. The lifting of the US veto on Turkish intervention in Syria thus had a major role in pushing Turkey into action against both ISIL and the YPG, although Washington still has reservations about the creation of a safe haven in northern Syria, as per Ankara's demands.

By insisting on backing the Kurds and adopting them as local proxies in the fight against ISIL rather than the Syrian opposition factions nominated by Turkey for the task, Washington posed a threat to Turkish interests in Syria. Washington's support for the Kurdish YPG has been multifaceted, including airdrops of weapons. American generals, including General Joseph Votel, commander of the US Central Command in the Middle East, have visited the Kurds in northeast Syria, boosting their confidence and giving a sense of the importance of the role allotted to them, a move that predicted raised Turkish protests. In addition, the United States' clear discomfort with developments in Russian-Iranian relations, following the Russian air force's use of the Hamadan military

base in Iran, means it is in no position to give up on any of its allies in the region now that it has realized that it may have lost its wager on Iran.

Rapprochement with Russia

Russian direct entry into the Syrian conflict on September 30, 2015 ended Turkish hopes of creating a buffer zone in northern Syria, something it had long tried to persuade Washington of the need for. The downing of a Russian plane entering Turkish airspace on November 24, 2015 closed Syrian airspace off to Turkish planes. Although Turkey continued to shell YPG forces to prevent them deploying along the whole of the southern border, particularly to the west of the Euphrates from Afrin towards A'zaz and the areas controlled by the Syrian opposition, the results of the bombing were limited overall, since the Kurds, with joint American-Russian support, maintained control over more territory, be it east or west of the Euphrates.

In signaling an end to the rupture with Russia, especially after the failed coup, Erdogan was able to neutralize Russia in the conflict with the Kurds. After Erdogan's arrival in St. Petersburg, the Russians closed the bureau of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (the Syrian branch of the PKK). Prior to that, the Kremlin had allowed it to open a bureau in Moscow at the height of the crisis caused by the downing of the Russian plane, and even provided political and military support to the party in Syria, and even within Turkey itself. In short, Russia's approach to the Kurdish issue resembles that of other major powers: it is pragmatic rather than principled, and no different to their treatment of Arab leaders.

The Kurds as a Confluence of Interests for Turkey and Iran

In tandem with a mending of relations with Russia, Turkey was also moving to patch things up with Iran – Syria representing a fundamental sticking point between them. Recent Russian and American pronouncements about the possibility of the division of Syria, or at minimum the creation of a federal arrangement where the Kurds enjoy considerable autonomy caused anxiety in both Ankara and Tehran, leading them to intensify consultations over Syria to bring their positions closer together. To retaliate for attacks within Iranian borders, Iran escalated its attacks on bases of the Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party and other Kurdish factions in northern Iraq. This explains the absence of any negative Iranian reaction to Turkey's direct military involvement in northern Syria, even though Tehran would usually not decline to voice its irritation with Turkish

policies in Syria, and has long authorized its allies to confront Turkey over any military intervention, whether in Syria or in Iraq. This was the case when Turkey set up a training camp for Peshmerga forces in Bashiqa, near Mosul, in the fight against ISIL last December.

Even the Syrian regime issued only a perfunctory press release condemning the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria as a “violation of Syrian sovereignty”. Yet in the days prior to the Turkish intervention in Syria, the Assad regime bombarded the positions of the YPG in Hasaka on the basis that it was a “terrorist organization controlled by the PKK”, when previously they had treated those units as allies.

Pre-Emptying a Russian–American Agreement

The Turkish military intervention was an attempt by Ankara to ensure it remains part of the security and political arrangements being formulated by Russians and the Americans for Syria. On August 26, 2016, the American and Russian foreign ministers held a long meeting in Geneva to put the final touches on a two-track agreement on Syria. The first track is security-military and aims to coordinate Russian and American efforts to take on extremist groups in Syria (ISIL and the Nusra Front, or Fath al-Sham), and the second track is political and aims to revive the talks to end the conflict in Syria between the regime and the opposition.

With this timing of its military intervention, Turkey wanted to be part of the war against ISIL and a key player in any political solution to the Syrian crisis by virtue of being host to more than 3 million Syrian refugees and the serious ramifications it continues to suffer with the prolonging of the conflict in Syria past its fifth year.

Conclusion

Thus far, the Turkish military intervention seems limited in scale. Its main goal is restricted to pushing ISIL back from Turkey’s borders, preventing the YPG from filling the vacuum left by ISIL’s withdrawal, and then exerting control over the border strip with Syria, especially in the areas west of the Euphrates. It also represents a test of the ability of the Turkish government to subject the country’s army to civilian authority; to achieve equilibrium between conditional US support and Russia’s deliberate inaction; and to harmonize interests with Iran to end Kurdish aspirations for autonomy. At the same time, the intervention represents an opportunity for the Syrian opposition to

prove its weight in the confrontation with ISIL, and so reassert itself as a party that cannot be overlooked in any political settlement in Syria.