



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات  
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

POLICY ANALYSIS

# Turkey and the Question of Military Intervention: Pressures and Constraints

Emad Kaddorah | Oct 2014

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Series: Policy Analysis

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## Introduction

Turkey is facing critical choices over immediate military intervention in its own backyard.<sup>1</sup> It can either respond to escalating calls and demands for direct intervention; prioritize its own reading of the internal and regional developments and put its national interests first; or maintain its ambiguous position of pledging solidarity and support for the international coalition against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) while avoiding direct military confrontations. Each of these options come with costs and benefits on both domestic and regional fronts. ISIL is almost at the Turkish border, which means Turkey is facing its biggest challenge in decades. The inherent threat in the expansion of ISIL is not only limited to the possibility of attacks on Turkish soil, but also to the prospect of instability that could threaten Turkey internally. There have been escalating calls, especially from Kurds, for Turkey to intervene in Syria, and to rescue Kobane by providing support for the fighters besieged there. Large protests have also erupted, condemning Ankara's failure to intervene in Kobane, and accusing the Turkish state of indifference toward the fate of the Syrian-Kurdish enclave. Demands for intervention have also been taken up at international level, the US-led coalition being particularly interested in the prospect of military assistance from Turkey.

Turkey took a more active role in the international coalition against the Islamic State following the release of Turkish hostages captured in Mosul. With the announcement of its active backing of the US-led coalition, Turkey also underscored the importance of cooperation with elements on the ground rather than just relying on air strikes. Yet, Ankara's actions thus far indicate its resolve not to bow to pressure, and its unwillingness to become involved in a battle without an integrated strategy towards the regional situation as a whole, and without international commitments, especially on the part of NATO, of which Turkey is a member. Over the last three years, Turkey has assiduously avoided entering an open-ended war in Syria, despite a Turkish military plane having been brought down by Syrian missiles and accusations that the Syrian regime was orchestrating attacks on Turkish soil, and in spite of the parliamentary mandate granted to the government at the end of 2012 to deploy ground forces outside the country's borders.

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<sup>1</sup> *As this paper went to print, Turkey unexpectedly announced it would allow Peshmerga fighters to cross its territory to defend Kurds in Kobane, marking an abrupt shift from Ankara's position to date.*

## Views on the Turkish Position

There are different views as to why Turkey is reluctant to militarily intervene against ISIL, or to even provide a corridor for aid and military equipment to the besieged town of Kobane. One view is that Turkey is uncomfortable with the level of autonomy gained in the Kurdish region of Syria, which could lay the foundations for the establishment of a larger independent Kurdish entity in the Middle East, and thus strengthen separatist tendencies among Turkey's Kurds. Another view holds that Turkey's decades long misgivings regarding the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) cannot be suddenly dispelled despite an emergency situation, particularly as Turkey still deems the PKK a terrorist organization. Many put down Turkey's present position to its perception of Syrian Kurds as allies of the Syrian regime,<sup>2</sup> particularly after the incentives extended by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to obtain the support of Kurds against the armed opposition—such as granting some of them Syrian nationality and cultural rights and opening Kurdish schools. There are also suspicions that the Syrian government made contacts with the PKK in order to create allies within Syria from the PKK ally, the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party.<sup>3</sup>

Others take this view further and accuse Turkey of not minding Kobane's fall since this would actually serve its interests. Amberin Zaman, a commentator on Turkish affairs in the Western press, believes that Ankara sees an opportunity in the fall of the town, despite the risk of wide criticism: "Turkey would probably be happy to see Kobane fall. The town has emerged as a symbol of Kurdish resistance. It hosted [PKK leader Abdullah] Ocalan when he used to live in Syria [...] Kobane also has huge strategic significance. It lies between a swath of uninterrupted Kurdish-controlled towns and villages to the east collectively known as the canton of Jazeera and the Kurdish-administered town of Afrin to the southwest. The Kurds have long wanted to link the three by pushing out the Islamic State and other Syrian rebels from the areas separating them. The prospect of a Kurdish entity run by the PKK is more than Turkey

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<sup>2</sup> "Turkey torn between ISIL and the PKK," *Hurriyet Daily News*, <http://goo.gl/702ZRW>; Sinan Ulgen, "Turkey's Dangerous Bet on Syria," *The New York Times*, October 9, 2014, <http://goo.gl/BAQUxF>.

<sup>3</sup> Damla Aras, "The Syrian Uprising: Turkish-Syrian Relations Go Downhill," *Middle East Quarterly* vol. 19, no. 2 (Spring 2012), p. 50.

can stomach. Kobane's fall would deal a humiliating blow to the PKK and weaken its support among Syria's Kurds. It would also force [Salih] Muslim [head of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)] and the PYD to patch up their differences with Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq [...] Although Barzani has spoken in defense of Kobane, he has yet to reproach Turkey over its stance."<sup>4</sup>

Also, amongst the Kurds in Turkey are those that believe that the continuation of the current peace process between the Kurds and the Turkish government requires Turkey to be more prepared to help the People's Protection Units in Syria, which are facing a struggle for survival against ISIL. The Turkish assumption that the peace process will not be fundamentally affected by current events and that the PKK will not renounce the ceasefire with Turkey and decide to fight Turkey and ISIL at the same time is facing a serious test. Kurds took to the streets in demonstrations against Turkish reluctance to intervene in Kobane, resulting in tens of fatalities and hundreds of injured across Turkey. The PKK also threatened to pull out of talks completely if Turkey failed to offer support or allow military supplies to reach Kurdish fighters besieged in the town.<sup>5</sup>

## Constraints on Turkey Intervening Militarily

Ever since the outbreak of demonstrations in Syria, Turkey has played a critical role in the Syrian crisis. Turkey offered to mediate between the Syrian regime and the opposition, but when the offer was rejected it declared its support for the opposition and demanded that the Syrian president step down. Turkey tried hard to drum up international (particularly Western) support for intervention to achieve this aim but having failed to muster sufficient backing to remove the regime, Ankara claimed that "Turkish mediation efforts early on in the war were not supported and were even undermined by western powers."<sup>6</sup> It then backed the opposition by receiving military figures who broke with the regime, for whom it set up a special camp, and then hosted

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<sup>4</sup> "Erdogan's Syria policies spark riots in Kurdish cities," *Al Monitor*, October 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/Tu8qcQ>.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey torn between ISIL and the PKK."

<sup>6</sup> Simon Tisdall, "Radicalisation in Syria poses growing threat to Europe, says Turkish leader," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2013, <http://goo.gl/7VslZ6>.

the leadership of the Free Syrian Army to coordinate the military operations of the revolution, as well as the opposition's political leadership. Turkey oversaw the declaration of the Syrian National Council in Istanbul and the declaration of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, in addition to taking in refugees.

From the start, Turkey has insisted that any direct intervention it is asked to undertake must be on the basis of what it has been demanding for three years, that is, an integrated strategy to solve the crisis in the region as a whole, rather than a response to the new threat that has come to the surface with the advance of ISIL towards the Turkish border. Turkey and Syria share a 900km-long border, which means that ethnic and sectarian threats and the dangers of smuggling and the movement of fighters stretch the length of this border, and are not just restricted to areas where the Kurds are currently concentrated.

It is thus not surprising that Turkey would persevere in its demand of a comprehensive vision for a solution to the crisis. According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, an international strategy is needed not only to destroy ISIL, but also to force Assad to leave power and end the conflict in Syria – for the former objective cannot succeed without the latter. In his view, this strategy must include the establishment of safe zones in Syria for civilians and opposition forces, protected by no-fly zone.<sup>7</sup> Turkey also makes US support for “regime change in Damascus” a condition for its participation in the fight against ISIL, which it views as a symptom, rather than a cause, of the problems in the Middle East.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of ground operations has been made clear by Erdogan, but so has the need of joint action as a condition of such: “The terror will not be over [...] unless we cooperate for a ground operation.”<sup>9</sup> This should be understood as an indication that Turkey will not take on this operation on its own, but by means of the participation and support of the states in the international coalition. Turkey fears that after becoming

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<sup>7</sup> “Washington Post’s Ignatius Agrees with Turkey’s Stance on Syria,” *Daily Sabah*, October 11, 2014, <http://goo.gl/pMY6bH>.

<sup>8</sup> Ulgen.

<sup>9</sup> “Erdogan visits Syrian refugees, calls for ground operation against ISI,” *Daily Sabah*, <http://goo.gl/BtZN74>.



involved in military operations on the ground, the crisis will turn into a regional matter for Turkey alone to deal with, rather than an international problem. Ankara firmly expressed its unwillingness to turn its soldiers into “mercenaries,” and insists that troops from the coalition as a whole take part in ground operations, and not just its own troops. Yalçın Akdoğan, Turkey’s deputy prime minister, stated that “the international community should act together against ISIL militants [...] if you are that far sincere about the matter, let's do this together. Are the Turkish soldiers your mercenaries? There has to be a concrete plan for the future of Syria.”<sup>10</sup> But the Turkish emphasis on a comprehensive strategy that includes regime change in Syria has not been met with overwhelming response in Washington. For the Western states, ISIL is currently the core threat.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, some hold that the conditions laid down by the Turkish government for intervention aim to achieve elusive goals, for Turkey is aiming to fight ISIL, change the regime in Syria, and prevent any possibility of Kurdish independence, all at the same time. This overambitious program may end up accomplishing none of these objectives while squandering the opportunity to contribute to the stabilization of the region.<sup>12</sup>

Despite differences in visions and aims, Turkey and the international coalition agree that the spread of ISIL, its control of large parts of Iraq and Syria, and the declaration of a state that does not recognize existing borders and that threatens the states of the coalition with revenge and destabilization represent an imminent danger that is a threat to all. Both sides recognize that there is an urgent need to take practical steps that will help to stem the advance of ISIL and its growing strength. The current reality demands support for the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, something over which there is no dispute, at a time when it is agreed that the armed Syrian opposition is the only qualified party to take on ISIL in northern and eastern Syria, since Turkey categorically refuses to cooperate with the Syrian regime, as do many Western states.

Given the above, the United States and Turkey have agreed to arm and train groups from the “moderate” Syrian opposition. The Turkish National Intelligence Organization is responsible for identifying moderate members of the opposition for training at a

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<sup>10</sup> “Are Turkish soldiers your mercenaries? Deputy PM asks,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, October 11, 2014, <http://goo.gl/1S2GpC>.

<sup>11</sup> Ulgen.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

military base on the Turkish-Syrian border, while the United States has agreed to provide all the weaponry and equipment required for the training. The first group will consist of 4,000 members of the opposition.<sup>13</sup> Notably, this American-Turkish program excludes the Kurdish People's Protection Units—the armed wing of the PYD—because Turkey considers them to be linked with a listed terrorist group—the PKK.<sup>14</sup> For some observers, this represents a move by Turkey to prevent the PKK becoming part of the international coalition in the war on ISIL, since that would strengthen and legitimize the PKK before a final peace agreement is concluded between it and Turkey. Turkish concerns are growing as the PKK is preparing to take advantage of the coalition's pressing need to find ways to contain the danger and spread of ISIL. Cooperation with the PKK might require that the United States remove it from its list of terrorist organizations to enable it and some EU states to supply it with weapons. Turkey sees that now is not the moment for an improvement in the PKK image, since this might lead to it taking maximalist positions in the talks for a settlement between the two sides currently underway. Should these talks fail, Turkey could once again enter into confrontation with the PKK, albeit at a time when the PKK might have acquired international backing and support.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, the Turkish government finds it peculiar that the Kurdish parties and even some Turkish opposition parties, such as the Republican People's Party (CHP), are calling for intervention to help the town of Kobane, when these very parties have been cautioning against intervention in Syrian affairs for the last three years. Indeed, when the Turkish Parliament passed a bill giving the army a one-year authority to deploy Turkish land forces outside the country, MPs from both the CHP and the Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) objected. At the time the CHP and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) believed that the Syrian regime was arming the PKK and

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<sup>13</sup> "Turkey, US to Provide Military Training for Syrian Opposition," *Daily Sabah*, October 11, 2014, <http://goo.gl/8JIhhK>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Sinan Ulgen and F. Doruk Ergun, "A Turkish Perspective on the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate," *EDAM Discussion Paper Series* 2014/6, September 1, 2014, [http://www.edam.org.tr/Media/IcerikFiles/1019/ISIL\\_TR\\_Perspective.pdf](http://www.edam.org.tr/Media/IcerikFiles/1019/ISIL_TR_Perspective.pdf).

equipping one of the branches of the Kurdish secessionist movement along the Turkish-Syrian border in order to take revenge for Turkish policy towards Syria.<sup>16</sup>

## The Necessity of Military Intervention

Contrasting positions within the Turkish political arena and pressures for immediate military intervention raise an important question over the government's threshold for direct military intervention.

When Turkey decided to officially participate in the international coalition against ISIL in Syria and Iraq, it knew the risk of it potentially becoming a target for revenge attacks. Therefore, its exposure to direct attack from ISIL or any group in Turkey openly supported by ISIL represent a direct threat to Turkish national security. Were that to happen, direct military intervention would likely enjoy popular backing, and perhaps broad-based calls for a response, particularly if ISIL proceed to target the tomb of Suleyman Shah, grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman dynasty. This site lies within Syrian territory north of Aleppo some 30km from the border, and is sovereign Turkish territory according to the Ankara agreement of 1921. In fact, the tomb is the most likely target for a revenge attack by ISIL, given its location within Syria and the group's control of territory close by and military superiority in the face of a limited Turkish garrison based there. In fact, Turkey has already reinforced its defenses there by deploying Special Forces along the border close to the site and stationing artillery and missiles that can strike the area without the need to breach Syrian airspace.<sup>17</sup>

Turkey might have thus far been reluctant to engage in military intervention, but it has clearly stated that should its national security be threatened, or in case of an attack on the tomb of Suleyman Shah, it "will not be hesitant to take all kinds of measures."<sup>18</sup> The Turkish government has come to realize that the majority of Turks agree that targeting

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<sup>16</sup> Fatma Kayabal, "Reaction in Turkey to AKP's Policy on Syria: Divided Society, Polarized Politics," *Qantara*, October 12, 2012, <http://goo.gl/8iihhB>.

<sup>17</sup> Can Kasapoğlu and F. Doruk Ergun, "Defending the Tomb of Suleyman Shah: Turkey's Options and Challenges," *EDAM Discussion Paper Series 2014/8*, October 1, 2014, <http://www.edam.org.tr/Media/Files/2159/SuleymanSahReport.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> "Turkey's ISIS Formula: A New Power in The Region", *Daily Sabah*, October 12, 2014, <http://goo.gl/JVp3zq>.

the tomb constitutes a clear aggression against Turkish territory, given that the tomb symbolizes Turkish sovereignty. In a survey by Istanbul University, people were asked, "What are the conditions that would require Turkey to militarily intervene in Syria?" Of the respondents, 79 percent replied that only the "existence of a direct threat against Turkey" would justify military intervention in Syria.<sup>19</sup> This was prior to the ramped up ISIL threat and its encroachment on the Turkish border, one can only imagine the scale of support for military intervention given an imminent threat or an actual attack.

Furthermore, taking an act of aggression against Turkish territory or interests as a condition for military intervention implies two other things for the Turkish government. First, the state would attempt to maintain its status as a regional power that only acts on lawful grounds in line with the norms of international law, such as the right to respond to armed attack as provided by the UN Charter. Secondly, and importantly on the military level and as political cover, Turkey would avoid a unilateral response, but respond as part of collective action, since, under Article 5 of the NATO Charter, all member states are obliged to defend it. Turkey thus views any military intervention that does not conform with international commitments or the provisions of its Western alliances as depriving it from collective measures and the military capabilities provided by these alliances.

Regionally, Turkey is wary of the security and geopolitical ramifications arising from the changeable nature of ISIL and its putative state. Some analysts believe that Turkey wants to have political influence in the post-Assad period by forging links with Syrian revolutionary groups. This scenario would cause Iran to lose influence in Syria, and perhaps even Lebanon, which would mean Turkey's historic rival losing ground in the regional power struggle.<sup>20</sup> Turkish-Iranian relations witnessed tension at the beginning of the Syrian crisis because of fundamental differences in their approaches. Despite efforts to let shared interests prevail over matters of regional conflict, as exemplified by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani describing last June partnership with Turkey as

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<sup>19</sup> On the opinion poll conducted between December 26, 2012 and January 6, 2013 by Istanbul University in 26 Turkish cities and comprising around 1,000 people, see: Kadri Gürsel, "Poll Shows Weak Support for Turkey's Syria Policies," *The Monitor*, <http://goo.gl/GtPJ5L>.

<sup>20</sup> Ulgen and Ergun.

“strategic and powerful,”<sup>21</sup> there have recently been mutual recriminations between the two countries to the effect that each is playing a dangerous role in Syria. With respect to Iraq, relations with Turkey have improved given both countries’ interests in confronting the threats from the growing security vacuum along the borders and the growing ISIL threat, particularly now that it controls large swaths of Syria and Iraq. To contain the re-emergence of a Kurdish problem, Turkey is keen to strengthen its relations with Iraqi Kurdistan in the energy, economic, and security fields and so strengthen the contribution of this region to Turkey’s security.

## Conclusion

Despite the dangerous ramifications of the fall of the Kobane to ISIL—at the level of humanitarian cost, Turkish national security, and success of the peace process with the Kurds—the Turkish government insists that it will not be pressurized over intervention and its timing, and that it is dealing with the disaster of Kobane in the framework of the overall picture of events in the region, in Syria in particular. Turkey has reiterated that it will only engage in direct military action when it is justified by the right to respond, and once it receives international and NATO support. As for immediate intervention, Turkish references to its troops not being mercenaries indicate that it will only take part within the international coalition against ISIL, many of whose members are taking air action against ISIL while refusing to commit ground forces.

In so doing, Turkey is reminding others that it is a central regional state which sets its own course and does not follow the agenda of others, a stance clearly echoed in Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu’s writings and speeches from his days as a university professor, and then prime ministerial adviser and eventually foreign minister. The Turkish position to date seems to support the thesis that in contrast to its activist role over the past ten years, Turkey is now – following the recent presidential elections—limiting its involvement in regional problems. Instead the Turkish government is set on its strategy for 2023, the centenary of the foundation of the Turkish republic, which envisions Turkey becoming the world’s number ten economy, the adoption of a new constitution to found a “new republic,” and a solution to the Kurdish question. It is thus unlikely that Turkey will shift its focus away from these goals, unless there is a direct

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<sup>21</sup> “Turkey, Iran on different page in Syria but ties ‘strategic,’” *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 9, 2014, <http://goo.gl/AtZSwH>.

armed attack or the presence of real threat of this. Even then, any intervention might be limited in scale to a response that maintains Turkish prestige, establishes a deterrent, and reduces the threat, without embarking on an open-ended conflict in the neighborhood.

On the basis of the overall Turkish position on military intervention, it can be inferred that Ankara may be counting on three things to avoid, or lessen, the negative implications of ignoring calls for intervention.

First, Turkey might have concluded that it is in the interest of the PKK to stick with the peace talks, or in the worst case suspend them, since the regional climate does not favor an outright withdrawal from talks or the renewal of a war against the government. Turkey might also assume that the PKK is unable to open fronts in Turkey against the government and in Syria against ISIL at the same time, since it has lost influence in the regions of Syria that supported it, while Iraqi Kurdistan would not welcome any escalatory steps against Turkey given the confluence of positions and shared interests.

Second, Ankara is counting on ISIL recognizing Turkey's strength as a cohesive state, not a weak or failed state plagued by a security vacuum and regional conflict as is the case with Iraq and Syria. Having said that, Turkey does not discount the need to respond to the challenge in the worst case scenario of ISIL carrying out some of its threat

Third, Turkey believes that it is in the interest of the region as a whole to deal with the heart of the problem and its symptoms at the same time, which is what it has been calling for throughout the past period. This means putting pressure on the international coalition to adopt Turkey's vision and focus on the removal of the Syrian regime, the confrontation of ISIL in Iraq and Syria, and the training and arming of the Syrian opposition on the view that it is the party on the ground qualified to confront the two together. Turkey is also adamant in persuading the international coalition to adopt its suggestion for a buffer zone, or what it calls a security zone, by means of a no-fly zone on the Turkish-Syrian border to absorb refugees and secure bases for the opposition inside Syria.

In the end, Turkey may try to avoid becoming involved in full ground operations that may drain its capabilities, stymie its economic and political ambitions, and drag it into a conflict with changeable and transnational parties like ISIL, or a sectarian war, or a

direct or indirect confrontation with a rival regional power like Iran which has wide influence in both Syria and Iraq. In the midst of the current disparate positions, visions, and analyses, the region is going through a period where every actor, state or non-state, is trying to avoid the worst case scenarios in light of the international, regional, and local free for all, and is trying to give its own interests the highest priority according to a pragmatic, realistic, political view.