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The US and Turkey: Diverging Views on Syria

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Introduction

The recent American-Turkish polarization over the handling of the situation in Kobane, the Kurdish town close to the Turkish border in northern Syria, is just the tip of the iceberg among a growing series of American-Turkish differences on a range of regional and domestic issues. The divergence of views between Turkey and America on the Arab revolutions, and the counterrevolution that followed, are no secret. Additionally, Washington has not disguised its irritation with the downturn in Turkish-Israeli relations, nor is it pleased with Ankara's openness to some Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Some in Congress have started to take a harder line against Turkey, accompanied by a parallel escalation in American media calling for a re-examination of Turkey's place in NATO, and even its expulsion, following claims that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has "authoritarian" and "extreme Islamist" leanings.¹ In December 2013, insinuations by the then Prime Minister Erdogan of a possible US role in the corruption investigations launched by the Turkish police against those close to him, and his threat to expel the US ambassador from Ankara, were but a forewarning of growing tensions in bilateral relations between the US and Turkey.²

As the crisis in Kobane escalates, US-Turkish disagreements over priorities in the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) have sharpened. Kobane has been facing a major assault from ISIL, which has caused most of its residents to flee to Turkey, leaving behind only a few hundred fighters from the Kurdish Popular Protection Units which are allied with the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Despite the PYD being backed by US airstrikes, the inability of airstrikes alone to stop ISIL, along with the risk of Kobane falling to ISIL (albeit a risk that has now lessened), has driven American-Turkish relations to a new low. America wants Turkey to support PYD fighters, but Turkey considers the PYD a terrorist party, because of its links to the

¹ James Goldgeier, "ISIS Fight not a NATO Mission, or in Turkey's Interest," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2014, <http://goo.gl/IA1vyI>; Jonathan Schanzer, "Time to Kick Turkey out of NATO?" *Politico Magazine*, October 09, 2014, <http://goo.gl/vEjWBy>; "Turkey's Wrong Turn," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2014, <http://goo.gl/ktP6ia>; Martin Matishak, "Ros-Lehtinen blasts Turkey as slow to act on ISIS," *The Hill*, October 21, 2014, <http://goo.gl/rnrkrE>.

² Selcuk Gokoluk and Benjamin Harvey, "Turkey's Erdogan Says Foreign Ambassadors Could Be Expelled," *Bloomberg News*, December 21, 2013, <http://goo.gl/kiVkr6>.

Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – an organization both Turkey and the United States class as terrorist.

Discrepancy in Calculations

The current tensions between the US and Turkey are predominantly linked to a discrepancy in both sides' assessments and priorities on Syria. Turkey has long been advocating the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime as critical to an overall strategy on Syria. For the United States, this is outside the scope of its new war in the Middle East. Despite the efforts of US Secretary of State John Kerry to deny the existence of any "discrepancy"³ between the two sides regarding the war on ISIL, facts would seem to point otherwise. Frequent reports in US media by unnamed US officials have confirmed growing tension between the two countries and of American "disappointment" with Turkey.⁴ On the Turkish side, Ankara was quick to deny the statements of US national security advisor Susan Rice maintaining that Turkey had agreed to allow international coalition forces to use the Incirlik military base in the war against ISIL.⁵ This was followed by the US initiative to airdrop arms to Kurdish fighters, which completely disregarded Turkish objections to the plan, but did result in a slight change to the balance of forces in favor of the Kurdish fighters in Kobane.

The US Position

President Obama's administration feels that the fall of Kobane would constitute a severe blow to its strategy in the war against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This is because Obama had declared from day one that he would never send in ground troops, and would make do with providing air support for the Iraqi and Syria forces on the ground, along with the provision of weapons and training. Given the poor performance of the Iraqi army, especially around Anbar, and the absence of a "trusted partner" on the ground in Syria,

³ "Kerry: 'No discrepancy' over Turkey's role in fight against Islamic State," *Reuters*, October 14, 2014, <http://goo.gl/oOZQVB>.

⁴ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, "U.S. frustration rises as Turkey withholds military help from besieged Kobane," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2014, <http://goo.gl/rjV7Wz>.

⁵ "Turkish official denies report of deal with US to use bases for ISIS strikes," *FoxNews.com*, October 13, 2014, <http://goo.gl/A0Lbjz>.

this strategy has come into question – even more so after Martin Dempsey, head of the US joint chiefs-of-staff, on more than one occasion expressed that he might have to recommend the deployment of US ground forces, statements that no doubt caused much embarrassment to the White House.

In its strategy against ISIL, the US is facing more of a dilemma with the Syrian side of things than it is with Iraq. In Baghdad there is a government that the United States recognizes and is able to work with, especially since the replacement of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki with Haider al-Abadi as the head of Iraq's "national unity government." As for its relation with Iraqi Kurdistan, for decades the US has successfully worked with Iraqi Kurds, long before they settled their disagreements with the Iraqi central government in Baghdad.

In Syria, however, the American administration does not recognize the legitimacy of President Assad, preventing cooperation with the regime. Although Obama has repeatedly called for the need to remove Assad, his administration has not followed up with policies to force his exit. When it comes to Syria, the strategy to fight ISIL, unveiled by Obama on September 10, has been limited to the announcement of training programs for "appropriately vetted" forces of the "moderate Syrian opposition," amounting to 500 million dollars in the first year, as a first stage,⁶ which will be run in Saudi Arabia and Turkey.⁷ The problem is that training and security vetting will take years to form a Syrian fighting force capable of taking on ISIL and maintaining control of the territories it loses as a result of US airstrikes.⁸ Hoping to resolve this dilemma, the Obama administration started to put pressure on Turkey to play a greater role in assisting the Kurdish military forces in Kobane, be it by arming them and allowing other

⁶ "Statement by the President on ISIL," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/Zhu4ig>; Marco Cáceres, "US Will Back the 'Appropriately Vetted' in Syria. Huh?" *The Huffington Post*, September 15, 2014, <http://goo.gl/x0fGau>.

⁷ Michael R. Gordon, Eric Schmitt, "Saudi Arabia Will Grant U.S. Request for Anti-ISIS Training Program," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-isis.html>; "US says Turkey will train moderate Syrian rebels but presses for details," *The Guardian*, October 11, 2014, <http://goo.gl/kV75Sw>; "Saudi Arabia agrees to host training of moderate Syria rebels," *Reuters*, September 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/AER9dR>.

⁸ Phil Stewart and Missy Ryan, "Up to 15,000 Syrian rebels needed to retake eastern Syria -U.S. military," *Reuters*, September. 26, 2014, <http://goo.gl/x3GWvN>.

Kurdish fighters to cross the border to reinforce them, or by direct Turkish military intervention on the ground. Turkey however refused to become unilaterally involved with ground forces against ISIL in Syria without a clear strategy to get rid of the Assad regime, leading the Obama administration to undertake airdrops of weapons to Kurdish fighters on October 20, thus infuriating Turkey.

Turkey's anger is legitimate. America is providing support to what both sides consider to be terrorist organizations or linked to terrorist organizations, and arming them without prior "background checks" or training, the very conditions that the United States imposes on the Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁹ The United States justified its actions on the grounds that Kobane could not be allowed to fall to ISIL, and that this was the overriding prerogative in taking such a step, adding that there had been contacts with Turkish officials to reassure them that there was no shift in US policy on the Kurdish issue, and that these actions were a temporary measure.¹⁰ America's "courtesy call" notifying Turkish officials that it armed Kurdish fighters left much to be desired in terms of showing respect for Turkish concerns. US State Department spokeswoman Marie Harf stated that the US administration "did not ask for the agreement" of Turkey on the operation to arm Kurdish fighters, indicating that the Syrian Kurdish Popular Defense Unit fighters were not linked to the PKK.¹¹ Turkish officials beg to differ.

Turkey's Position

On the other hand, Turkey – having deployed troops and military hardware in defensive positions along its border near Kobane – initially refused to support Kurdish fighters inside the besieged town, in spite of it being part of the international coalition against ISIL. Turkish officials questioned the American and Western focus on Kobane to the exclusion of other parts of Syria under the control of ISIL, or those subject to attacks by the Assad regime. Erdogan made it plain during a press conference in Paris at the end of October that he had reservations on intervening in Kobane. The Turkish president

⁹ Onur Ant and Selcan Hacaoglu, "Erdogan Says U.S. Arms for Kobani's Kurd Defenders an Error," *Bloomberg News*, October 23, 2014, <http://goo.gl/NVjs5a>.

¹⁰ Peter Sullivan, "Kerry: US arms to Kurds a temporary measure," *The Hill*, October 20, 2014, <http://goo.gl/ORWtib>.

¹¹ The Associated Press, "Turkey says it helps Kurdish fighters enter Syria," *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2014, <http://goo.gl/U4P64s>.

asked “Why Kobane rather than other cities such as Idlib, Hama, or Homs [...] when more than 40 percent of Iraqi territory is under the control of the Islamic State group?” and “Why has the coalition not acted in other regions?”¹²

Surprisingly, under intense American pressure Turkey later announced that it would allow fighters from the peshmerga—Iraqi Kurdish militias—and others from the Free Syrian Army to cross its territory in order to strengthen the Kurdish defenses in Kobane¹³. According to Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu, “the only way to help Kobane, given that other countries do not wish to send ground forces, is to send forces with peaceful or moderate inclinations to Kobane. Who are these people? The peshmerga [...] and the FSA.” He continued, “Train and equip the FSA so that regime forces do not take the place of ISIL fighters when they leave, and so that when those fighters withdraw their place is not taken by PKK terrorists.” Davutoglu further stated that Turkey would assist “any forces and any coalition by means of its airbases (inside Turkey) or by other means if there is a shared vision for the creation of a democratic and pluralistic Syria.”¹⁴

To understand Turkey’s behavior one needs to consider its sensitivities over the Kurdish question. Turkey entered a bitter conflict with Kurds demanding independence that lasted more than thirty years and led to tens of thousands of victims. In 2012, the Erdogan government launched a peaceful political process with the PKK to halt the armed conflict in exchange for greater rights for Turkish Kurds. The process has yet to reach its end, and Turkey fears that a Syrian Kurdish victory in Kobane may help to revive the separatist aspirations of Turkish Kurds, especially since Iraqi Kurds enjoy independence.

For Turkey, the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units, which are defending Kobane, and the Turkish PKK, which it classes as a terrorist organization, are one and the same. Turkey

¹² “Erdogan: the international coalition puts too much focus on Kobane,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0IK1D620141031>.

¹³ “Erdogan: Kurdish party agrees to passage of FSA fighters into Kobane,” *Reuters*, October 24, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0ID0YA20141024>; Patrick J. McDonnell, “Turkey to allow Iraqi Kurdish fighters passage into Syrian city,” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2014, <http://goo.gl/YblXPj>.

¹⁴ “Davutoglu: the moderate Syrian opposition and the peshmerga are those capable of saving Kobane,” *Reuters*, October 28, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKBN0IH19520141028>.

has also not forgotten how the PYD – which controls the Protection Units – only last year announced the establishment of self-rule in northeast Syria after the withdrawal of Assad regime forces. In fact the PYD still refuses to become part of the Syrian opposition fighting the regime, leading the Syrian opposition to accuse it of having friendly ties with the Assad regime.¹⁵

Turkey thus finds itself between the hammer and the anvil. Its lack of support for the Kurds in Kobane has angered its Western allies and threatens to damage the peace agreement with the Kurds, particularly since PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, who is held in a Turkish prison, threatened to end peace talks with Turkey if a massacre of the Kurds in Kobane were to occur.¹⁶ Ankara has also come under intense criticism from its Kurds, who have rioted across Turkey at the beginning of October in protest over the indifference displayed by the Turkish government over what was happening in Kobane, which led to tens of fatalities and hundreds injured. There has also been a further inflow of refugees into Turkey, which has already taken in around 200,000 refugees from Kobane. It would seem, however, that Turkey considers this cost less threatening than a Kurdish victory in Syria without a comprehensive strategy on the Syrian crisis which would look to overthrow the Assad regime, prevent the disintegration of Syria and avert the emergence of a de facto Kurdish state on its borders.

Different Priorities

The absence of a comprehensive strategy on Syria is the real spanner in the works between the United States and Turkey. For more than three years, the Obama administration has managed to ignore the Syrian crisis. With the exception of demanding the departure of Assad and talk of his having lost legitimacy, it has yet to offer any meaningful practical assistance to the Syrian revolution. If anything, it has vetoed the arming of the Syrian revolutionaries with advanced weapons, including ground-to-air missiles, which would have countered the air superiority of the Syrian

¹⁵ Oliver Holmes and Darren Butler, "Islamic State controls large parts of Kobane despite the airstrikes," Reuters, October 9, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0HY0Q720141009>; also see: Gulsen Solaker and Tom Perry, "Turkey to let Iraqi Kurds reinforce Kobani," Reuters, October 20, 2014, <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARAKCN0I928420141020>.

¹⁶ Ayla Albayrak, "Syrian Clash Jolts Turkish Peace Talks," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 13, 2014, <http://goo.gl/3feCGo>.

regime. Opponents of the Obama administration, at home and abroad, blame its approach to Syria for helping to create the vacuum filled by ISIL.¹⁷ In September, when Obama declared war on ISIL, the real battleground to “degrade and ultimately defeat” was ultimately Iraq. Intervention in Syria, on the other hand, was seen as a preventative measure from ISIL gaining a safe-haven,¹⁸ implying that the war against ISIL in Syria is supplementary and not full-fledged.

Overall, the accusation that the US lacks a comprehensive strategy on Syria is not limited to opponents of the Obama administration, but it is also the view of some current high-level officials in his administration. The *New York Times* recently revealed that Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel sent a memo to national security adviser Susan Rice that was “sharply critical” of the Obama administration’s overall strategic approach on Syria.¹⁹ According to reports in US media, the memo focused on the “need to have a sharper view of what to do about the Assad regime,”²⁰ particularly since the Assad regime is benefiting from US airstrikes on Islamic militant groups. The Assad regime is now directing its military force to weaken those who Washington calls the “moderate Syrian opposition”, and for whom it has declared its support, since US air power has spared it from taking on the strongest and best armed Islamist groups.²¹ In the face of these criticisms, all the White House has done is restate that the US strategy against ISIL in Iraq and Syria is working, and that that the claim that “weakening Islamist

¹⁷ The Editorial Board, “Dick Cheney Is Still Right”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 11, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/dick-cheney-is-still-right-1410305068#printMode>.

¹⁸ “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 17, 2014; <http://goo.gl/PCX9g8>; Borzou Daragahi and Daniel Dombey, “ISIS close in on Kobani, highlighting problems of US-led alliance,” *The Financial Times*, October 7, 2014, <http://goo.gl/IDLZ2a>; Mark Landler, Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt, “Turkish Inaction on ISIS Advance Dismays the U.S.,” *The New York Times*, October 7, 2014, <http://goo.gl/aEoAtg>.

¹⁹ Mark Landler, “Obama Could Replace Aides Bruised by a Cascade of Crises,” *The New York Times*, October 29, 2014, <http://goo.gl/Dcs5jJ>; Barbara Starr, “Hagel wrote memo to White House criticizing Syria strategy,” *CNN*, October 30, 2014, <http://goo.gl/7mNcLo>; Brendan Bordelon, “Report: Private Hagel Memo ‘Sharply Critical’ of Obama’s Syria Strategy,” *The National Review*, October 30, 2014, <http://goo.gl/L1YY7T>.

²⁰ Starr.

²¹ Landler.

militants²² is in the interest of Assad is plain wrong. The White House insists that Assad has “lost the legitimacy to lead.”²³ Yet, beyond verbal reassurances, the Obama administration has failed to propose any practical answers to a strategy on Syria, given the absence of a strategy in the first place.

By contrast, for Erdogan’s government, Syria is the number one priority since it constitutes the greatest impact on its national security. Today, Turkey is hosting more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and sees that the international failure to deal with the brutality of the Syrian regime and to support the Syrian revolutionaries are the two factors that have allowed Syria to be turned into a safe haven for “terrorist” organizations.²⁴ Because of this, Turkey has and continues to demand the creation of a safe zone on its border with Syria, protected by a NATO-enforced no-fly zone, for Syrian refugee camps in the context of a broader policy to bring down the Assad regime and neutralize the Syrian Kurdish problem in the framework of a new Syria.

The Obama administration and NATO, however, continue to reject Turkish demands²⁵ noting that up to now there is no alternative to the Assad regime and that establishing a no-fly zone might mean war with the Assad regime and its anti-aircraft missile systems.²⁶ This is widening the gap between the two sides and increasing Turkish insistence on not intervening militarily in the interest of the Syrian Kurds, or in Syria, as long as there is no clear strategy on Syria.

²² Doina Chiacu, “White House says Syria strategy working, policy on Assad clear,” *Reuters*, October 31, 2014, <http://goo.gl/YpndJ3>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ “Erdogan Reiterates Demand for Safe Zone as France Supports,” *Daily Sabah*, November 1, 2014, <http://goo.gl/xjsdLD>.

²⁵ “U.S. Adviser: Turkey ‘buffer zone’ plan for Syria not on the front burner,” *Reuters*, October 10, 2014, <http://goo.gl/d7uqvP>; “NATO says Syria buffer zone ‘not on table yet’,” *Agence France-Presse*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.afp.com/en/node/2924307/>.

²⁶ “Erdogan Reiterates Demand for Safe Zone as France Supports.”

Conclusion

The Turkish position on Kobane specifically, and on Syria more generally, is largely rooted in national strategic calculations. Even if Turkey were to be coerced by America and the West in showing more flexibility toward Kobane, it is unlikely Turkey would help create a new Kurdish independence problem on its southern border. Neither does Turkey, having heavily invested in support of the Syrian revolution against the Assad regime, wish to see a victory for the Syrian regime and its allies, especially Iran, which could threaten Turkey's role in the region and lead to its isolation.

The Obama administration, on the other hand, appears confused in its approach to Syria. This, of course, assuming that there are no other considerations for weakening Turkey and drawing it into a long-term war of attrition, a valid assumption considering the fierce US political and media campaign launched years ago against Turkey, and against the Justice and Development Party in particular. The harsh tone of the anti-Turkey rhetoric used by top American political circles calling for the end of Turkey's membership of NATO only highlights the growing rift between Turkey and the US.

In any case, as observed by American political analyst Charles Krauthammer, the blame for the increasingly hostile relations between the two sides over Syria falls squarely on Obama, for why should Turkey join a war when "the leader of the coalition himself is not serious?"²⁷ Ultimately, the question is not whether there is a US-Turkish difference—which is very real and present—but just how far this difference will go.

²⁷ "Krauthammer on ISIS: 'Why Would You Join A War When The Leader Of The Coalition Is Not Serious?'" *Real Clear Politics*, October 13, 2014, <http://goo.gl/TojxEq>.