

# What Turkey Could Lose and Gain From a Military Operation in Syria

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Jul 2, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/khsart-trkya-aw-mkasbha-almknt-mn-mlyt-skryt-fy-swrya\)](/ar/policy-analysis/khsart-trkya-aw-mkasbha-almknt-mn-mlyt-skryt-fy-swrya)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**Despite its potential short-term political benefits for the AKP, a ground incursion into northern Syria could pose numerous longer-term threats to Turkey, including renewed Kurdish separatism, economic retaliation by Russia, and armed reprisals by the Assad regime, the PYD, and ISIS.**

Recent media reports suggest that Turkey could be preparing a military incursion inside Syria. Specifically, Turkish forces may be aiming to seize a fifty-five-mile-long stretch of territory from Azaz in the west to Jarabulus in the east, establishing a twenty-mile-deep cordon sanitaire against the violence next door and creating a staging ground for pro-Turkey Syrian rebels.

The Justice and Development (AKP) government received authorization from parliament last October to deploy troops in Syria or Iraq if necessary, and on July 2, the opposition Nationalist Action Party (MHP) -- [which is in coalition talks with the AKP \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-2-the-akp-mhp-option\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-political-scene-post-election-part-2-the-akp-mhp-option) -- signaled its support for such an operation. Nevertheless, other Turkish domestic considerations bet against such an operation, with potential obstacles including a reluctant military, lack of public support, and opposition from the Republican People's Party (CHP) and Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). These factors raise questions about what Ankara might gain and lose from taking action in Syria.

## BLOCK THE PYD'S WESTWARD MARCH

Until recently, the Syrian side of Turkey's 510-mile border was controlled by a plethora of actors, including the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the "Islamic State"/ISIS, Jaish al-Fatah (dominated by al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra), and moderate elements of the rebel Free Syrian Army.

The PYD is linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey fought for decades until entering peace talks with the group in 2012. The PYD has controlled three isolated enclaves in Syria for some time: Afrin in the northwest, Kobane in the north-central region, and Jazeera in the northeast. In May -- with the help of U.S. airstrikes -- the group seized a nearly sixty-mile stretch of ISIS territory between the Jazeera and Kobane enclaves, effectively establishing a 250-mile-long PYD-controlled zone. Ankara now fears that the group may decide to link all three of its enclaves by moving further west and capturing territory between Azaz and Jarabulus.

This would be a momentous task -- while the PYD might be able to establish military control over the Azaz-Jarabulus belt with U.S. air support, it would have difficulty holding onto these Arab-majority areas short of a major ethnic cleansing campaign. Nevertheless, Ankara may try to preempt what it sees as a potential 385-mile-long PKK-run cordon to the south.

## **LOSE THE TURKISH KURDS**

**T**urkey's Kurdish community is excited about the HDP's success in the June 7 parliamentary elections. Running alongside various liberal factions, the party won an unprecedented eighty seats in the legislature, tied for the third-largest bloc. The Kurds now believe that their demands for political and language rights cannot be ignored anymore.

Turkish Kurds are also excited about recent developments in Iraq and Syria, where fellow Kurds have earned varying degrees of autonomy. They have taken an especially deep interest in the fate of Syrian Kurds, a majority of whom live in the three enclaves right across the border. Personal, familial, geographic, and political connections run deepest between Turkish and Syrian Kurds, and the PKK and its sister PYD enjoy similar dominance among large sectors of the Kurdish community on both sides of the border.

This explains the earthquake effect that the Kobane crisis had on Turkish politics beginning last year. In September, when the PYD-controlled enclave came under ISIS attack, Ankara initially refused to help, hoping to use the crisis as a bargaining tool to bring the PYD and PKK under its control. This strategy backfired: the United States intervened with weapons and airstrikes, and Kobane survived to become a Kurdish symbol. Ankara's decision also shattered the previously strong Kurdish support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP. Many conservative Kurds who had backed the AKP in the past switched their votes to the HDP, helping the latter more than double its tally compared to the 2011 elections.

A Turkish military effort to block the PYD would only compound the Kobane effect -- the AKP could lose all Kurdish support, or, worse yet, the Kurds could decide to break completely from Ankara. Turkish Kurds view the fate of the Syrian Kurds in the same way that Turks view their own ethnic brethren in northern Cyprus, and expect the government to offer a similar level of protection for them. If Ankara moves to block the Kurds in Syria instead of helping them, it could rupture Kurdish political and emotional commitment to the Turkish state, with repercussions for domestic stability.

## **ESTABLISH AN ANTI-ASSAD STAGING GROUND**

**I**n recent months, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia have pooled their resources to provide more weapons to opposition forces in northern Syria. This has allowed Jaish al-Fatah/Jabhat al-Nusra to take control of Idlib, the first provincial capital to be captured by this alliance. A Turkish military zone in Syria -- which could extend to the outskirts of Aleppo, Syria's largest city before the war -- would provide a staging ground for this alliance to threaten and perhaps even overrun Aleppo, furthering the AKP's goal of ousting the Assad regime.

## **RESETTLE REFUGEES BACK IN SYRIA**

Intervening in Syria could also help Turkey alleviate its burgeoning refugee problem. The country hosts nearly 2 million Syrian refugees, the largest such population in the world. Many of them are poor people from the Syrian countryside, often traumatized by the war, and their increasing presence in Turkish cities and camps has led to social and economic tensions that have spurred resentment against the AKP's Syria policy. To address this problem, Ankara could transfer some of the displaced persons into a military zone across the border -- namely, the 300,000 or so currently residing in Turkish camps, as well as potential future refugees.

## **INCUR THE WRATH OF ASSAD, RUSSIA, IRAN, AND ISIS**

**A** Turkish incursion to help the rebels would invite the wrath of the Assad regime, which is known to have connections to Marxist terrorist groups inside Turkey. Bashar al-Assad's chief international sponsor (Moscow) and regional patron (Tehran) would also be upset by such a move. Russia and Iran have historical connections to the PKK and could support the group in destabilizing any Turkish military zone inside Syria. Moscow could also push for anti-Turkish resolutions at the UN, though the United States might block such efforts. Finally, Russia could use its energy card against Ankara -- Turkey buys over half of its natural gas and oil from Russia, and a cut in supplies would hurt its economy severely.

For its part, ISIS might acquiesce to a Turkish incursion at first. The group would rather lose territory to Ankara than to its archenemies, the PYD and the United States. ISIS fighters might even pull back from certain areas without putting up a significant fight against Turkish forces. Yet a Turkish military zone would ultimately empower anti-ISIS rebel elements, so the group would inevitably begin harboring resentment toward Ankara -- in the long term, Turkey would face a serious ISIS threat.

## **GIVE THE AKP A LIFELINE IN CASE OF EARLY ELECTIONS**

**E**rdogan could cast a speedy Turkish takeover of Syrian territory as a victory for his AKP. This would help the party if Turkey is forced to undergo early elections. According to the constitution, a new government must be formed within forty-five days after the speaker of parliament and deputy speakers are chosen following elections. The new speaker was named on July 1 and the deputy speakers will be elected next week, at which point the clock will start ticking. The AKP has a plurality of votes in the legislature but is short the majority needed to form a government. Should its coalition negotiations with other parties fail to produce a government with a vote of confidence by mid-August, new elections will have to be held.

In that scenario, a Turkish incursion in Syria would cost the AKP further Kurdish support at the ballot box. At the same time, however, such a "victory operation" would bring in conservative voters from the MHP, with Erdogan no doubt hoping that this surge in support would help the AKP win an outright majority.

## **DESTABILIZE TURKEY IN THE LONG TERM**

**A** military operation in Syria could raise several long-term security and political challenges for Ankara. In addition to the previously mentioned threats -- a potential return to separatism among disgruntled and politically united Turkish Kurds; hostile moves by Russia; armed retaliation by the Assad regime, the PYD, and ISIS -- Turkey would eventually become an "occupier" in the eyes of the Syrian public, including the very forces it intended to boost. In the end, it may have to choose between making a costly long-term commitment to defend a military zone between Jarabulus and Azaz, or withdrawing from the area and thereby conceding "defeat."

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY**

**T**he U.S. posture on Turkish intervention would depend on the operation's details, scope, and impact. Washington is less likely to support a full-scale military incursion involving ground troops. Turkey is a NATO ally, and such an

operation could threaten to drag the United States into Syria's war. In contrast, a smaller operation -- limited to sustained shelling deep inside Syrian territory to create a safe haven for rebel groups -- would not be unwelcome in Washington, especially since it would cut ISIS supply lines and push the group out of certain areas. And if Turkey can establish a modus operandi with the PYD rather than ending up in conflict with the group, that would be an extra sweetener for tacit U.S. support, including access to certain U.S. military assets.

*Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power)*

*(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books), named by the Foreign Policy Association as one of the ten most important books of 2014. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)

Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)