

Explaining the Turkish Military's Opposition to Combating ISIS

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Brief Analysis

While Ankara's decision for or against fighting ISIS will be a political one, the military's lingering resentment toward the AKP, the PKK, and Arabs could be a formidable obstacle to Turkish intervention.

In all the discussions about Turkey not being particularly supportive to the coalition fighting the "Islamic State"/ISIS, little has been said about the military's role in shaping the government's policy. In part this reflects the ruling Justice and Development Party's diminution of the military's role in policy formulation since 2002, and the ascendancy of the National Intelligence Organization (MIT) for the implementation of Syria policy. But there are other reasons for the military's reluctance to combat ISIS, some of which have existed for decades and are more deeply rooted than the recent resentment over political emasculation of the military leadership. These views are also common among the politically active class beyond the AKP ruling elites.

ERGENEKON FALLOUT

In 2007, the AKP launched a set of trials against the military, the self-designated champion of secular politics in Turkey. Using a 2003 war game exercise as evidence, the government's prosecutors and police forces asserted that the military and its secular allies had planned a nefarious coup aimed at undermining civilian rule. Although the prosecutors could not provide a full and convincing account of the alleged plot in court cases dubbed "Sledgehammer" and "Ergenekon," the government nevertheless jailed numerous secular opposition figures and hundreds of military officers between 2007 and 2010, including a quarter of the country's generals. In August 2011, the military's top brass resigned en masse, signaling tacit acquiescence to the AKP's supremacy.

The government has since released nearly all of the Ergenekon suspects in an effort to appease the armed forces, but military leaders have maintained an attitude of resentment bordering on passive aggressiveness toward policymakers, in effect refusing to provide their counsel on many military matters. This reflects the generals' conviction that simply analyzing and planning for military scenarios could lead to incarceration. Regardless of the validity of coup plotting allegations since 2002, many senior officers remain convinced that their colleagues were

convicted on trumped-up charges simply for doing their job of developing plans to defend the nation from enemies domestic and foreign.

LINGERING GRUDGE AGAINST KURDISH NATIONALISM

Military leaders also resent their exclusion from the government's policy decision to secure peace with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), whose fighters have killed thousands of military personnel over the past three decades. In 2011, then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan entered into peace talks with the group that continue today. President Erdogan now seems to believe that successful PKK talks and improved ties with Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government could help make the Kurds a valuable regional ally. Continued talks would also buttress domestic stability, paving the way for yet another AKP electoral victory in the June parliamentary polls.

For the military's part, the animus against Kurdish fighters -- and by extension the nationalist Kurdish community from which the PKK recruits and draws material and moral support -- goes back much further than the AKP's recent peace efforts. Well before the PKK took up arms against the state four decades ago, Turkey's military-backed governments treated the Kurds as a subject people, refusing to recognize them as a separate community, suppressing the use of their language, and denying their history in the educational system, all as an integral part of the military's secular nationalist ideology. Although Turkey has witnessed significant improvement in Kurdish rights over the past decade, including the creation of a twenty-four-hour publicly-funded Kurdish-language television network, many Turks still distrust Kurdish nationalism. This attitude is especially prevalent among the military establishment and its extensive civilian support network. Such sentiments make the military unsympathetic to calls for aiding the PKK-aligned Kurdish groups fighting ISIS in northern Syria.

RELUCTANCE TO HELP ARABS

Older still is the bad blood between Turks and Arabs. While President Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu speak of natural harmony between all Sunni Muslims in the region, a half millennium of Ottoman imperial domination created deep distrust between Turkish and Arab Sunnis. Many Turks, especially those with military connections, look back at the past century as a series of betrayals by Western-backed Arabs -- during World War I, for example, Arab elites allied with the British rebelled against Istanbul. As one university-educated secular Turk told the author in 2012 after errant Syrian shelling killed five Turkish citizens in the Arab-majority border town of Akcakale, "They're not Turks, they are Arabs. What's it to us?" Although Turkey responded to that attack militarily, the retaliation was limited, and anti-Arab sentiments likely predispose some army officers to resist joining the broader anti-ISIS campaign.

MILITARY CONCERNS

The Turkish military's appetite for foreign engagements at the behest of its own government or the United States/NATO is often misstated. It is a conservative organization that well remembers public dissatisfaction with high Turkish casualties in the Korean War, and that avoided a combat role in Afghanistan. The generals are also concerned that fighting against ISIS or Syrian forces could reveal the military's technical and tactical weaknesses, potentially costing them public popularity they can ill afford to lose as their political struggle against Erdogan continues. Syria's shootdown of a Turkish fighter jet in June 2012 was a painful public example of such worries.

CONCLUSION

While Turkey's decision for or against combating ISIS militarily will be a political one, no one should minimize how difficult it will be to convince the military leadership that they should send Turks into harm's way, whether to fight alongside Kurds in Kobane or to protect Syrian Arabs in a safe zone.

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2014, he served as head of the political-military section at the U.S. embassy in Ankara. The views expressed in this article are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the IADC, the U.S. Department of State, or the U.S. government. ❖

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