

# Fear, Loathing, and an Ottoman Shrine in the Cold War Between ISIS and Turkey

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## The current stalemate between the two adversaries will persist unless ISIS overreaches or Turkey becomes more proactive in clamping down on jihadists.

**T**urkey and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are engaged in a cold war. Although they despise each other, they will avoid direct engagement, for fear of the massive damage that could result. A little known Turkish exclave that lies inside Syria, known as the Tomb of Suleyman Shah and currently under siege by ISIS, is a case in point.

The Tomb of Suleyman Shah -- a 2.47-acre sovereign Turkish district that houses the shrine of an Ottoman patriarch -- holds immense emotional value for the Turks. It is the burial place of the grandfather of Osman Bey, who founded the Ottoman Empire, and is guarded by 80 Turkish infantry troops. Even Kemal Ataturk, who notoriously turned his back on the Ottoman legacy and established the modern Turkish republic, asked to keep the tomb under Turkish rule at the end of the First World War.

The Tomb of Suleyman Shah is to Turkish-ISIS relations what West Berlin was to NATO-Warsaw Pact ties during the Cold War. Though the Soviets had surrounded West Berlin and tried to squeeze the Allies out of that half of the city during a short-lived blockade in 1948 to 1949, they chose not to invade. The Soviets could have overrun the city militarily, but they knew there would be repercussions from the United States that could damage Communism more broadly around the world.

Similarly, since 2013, ISIS has encircled the Tomb of Suleyman Shah. With tens of thousands of fighters and seemingly unlimited resources, ISIS poses a grave potential threat to the Turkish exclave.

Yet ISIS has refrained, aware that any attack on the small Turkish territory would constitute an attack on the country itself, and could bring Turkey even closer to the anti-ISIS front led by the United States. Speaking recently to the Turkish troops stationed at Suleyman Shah, the Turkish chief of the army general staff Necdet Ozel said 'Rest

assured that the Turkish Armed Forces will come to your side the moment we receive any word about you.'

Turkey's primary goal in Syria is to oust the Assad regime. Although Ankara sees ISIS as a threat, it does not want to focus on the group militarily for fear this would distract it from its primary objective of undermining Assad. Thus, despite ISIS' presence in both Syria and Iraq along the Turkish border, Turkey has been conspicuously absent from the anti-ISIS military operations.

These precarious dynamics between Ankara and ISIS held even when, after conquering Mosul in early June, the group took 46 Turkish citizens hostage from the Turkish consulate. Ankara diligently negotiated for the release of its hostages throughout the summer and successfully arranged for their release on September 20.

An ISIS attack on the Turkish exclave would end this delicate cold war, and likely result in the complete destruction of the tomb. ISIS loathes shrines, which it sees as anathema to Islam. The tomb's destruction and invasion of Turkish territory would rile public opinion against the group, at which point Turkey's leaders would find it difficult to avoid a full-scale military campaign against ISIS in tandem with Washington.

The last thing ISIS wants now is for Turkey to fully embrace the US-led military campaign against them. Turkey has a large and powerful military and a number of bases near its border with Syria and Iraq that the US could use to launch attacks against ISIS. This would further tighten the strategic noose around ISIS' neck. It is therefore highly unlikely that ISIS will attack the Tomb of Suleyman Shah -- unless Turkey targets the group first.

Turkey can hurt ISIS in more ways than one. Ankara, for example, could curb the flow of ISIS fighters heading to Syria by clamping down on its borders. Since the ISIS attack on the Turkish consulate in Mosul in June, Turkey has already been cracking down on the group's militants transiting its territory. But Ankara's vigor for the task has been limited -- so far. ISIS has a number of cells inside Turkey, including some near the country's border with Syria. Moreover, there are signs of recruitment activity in the country, including in Istanbul. Although the numbers are small -- historically, the Turks do not engage in violent jihad -- Ankara has nonetheless been circumspect about angering or provoking ISIS.

Even with the prevailing balance, ISIS could still target Turkey. A Cold War corollary in this regard would be the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. At the time, the Soviets' ideological hatred of the West and strategic overreach nearly overrode Moscow's fear of massive damage to its interests in the event of a war, bringing the Soviet Union to the brink of direct military conflict with the United States.

Until ISIS foments its own version of the Cuban Missile Crisis and thus overreaches in its stalemate with Ankara, Turkey and the group will remain in their own version of the Cold War, keeping the tomb of Suleyman Shah the 'West Berlin' of this war.

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