Turkey to Vote on Syria Policy

by Soner Cagaptay **(/experts/soner-cagaptay)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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

Turkey has thus far avoided overt participation in the international airstrikes against ISIS, reflecting its continued vulnerability to the group and its complex policy priorities in neighboring Syria.

On September 5, Turkey joined the "core coalition" of NATO countries arrayed against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), pledging political support to the alliance's efforts. Two weeks later, Ankara negotiated the release of Turkish hostages taken by ISIS at Mosul, leading many analysts to believe the government would publicly embrace military strikes against ISIS. Yet this has not been the case -- as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated earlier today, "Turkey is not a country in pursuit of temporary solutions, nor will Turkey allow others to take advantage of it." He also noted that "ignoring Syria will delay a proper solution" to the ongoing crisis. His remarks before parliament came one day before the legislature votes on a mandate to allow the deployment of foreign troops on Turkish soil.

Indeed, Ankara's priorities in Syria -- limiting the flow of refugees, ousting the Assad regime, and weakening the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- could complicate deeper U.S.-Turkish cooperation against ISIS. Moreover, Turkey still has vulnerabilities to the group and will likely continue to shy away from advertising overt assistance to Washington as long as they persist.

THE ISIS THREAT TO TURKEY

The Taliban-style "Islamic State" that ISIS runs in Iraq and Syria is Turkey's greatest existential threat since 1946, when Joseph Stalin demanded that Ankara cede control of the Bosporus and other territory to the Soviet Union. Moscow's threat pushed Ankara closer to the United States, resulting in Turkish membership in NATO in 1952. Today, the ISIS threat has engendered a similar pivot toward Washington. Erdogan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu know that only the United States has the necessary military hardware and intelligence assets to defeat ISIS in the long term. Turkey's seeming absence from the U.S.-led military coalition is therefore tactical rather than

strategic, reflecting the government's immediate concerns about two key vulnerabilities.

First, although Ankara secured the release of forty-six Turkish citizens held hostage in Mosul since June, eighty Turkish soldiers remain encircled by ISIS in an enclave known as the Tomb of Suleyman Sah, which lies twenty-five miles inside Syrian territory but has been a sovereign part of Turkey since the end of the Ottoman Empire. At that time, Turkey had lost Syria to France but kept a small piece of territory, about 11,000 square meters, containing the tomb of an important Ottoman patriarch (**read more about the tomb (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-piece-of-turkey-lies-in-the-middle-of-the-syrian-desert)**).

In recent months, ISIS has encircled this enclave and effectively taken the Turkish troops stationed there hostage, though it has not moved against them directly. ISIS leaders know that any harm done to the troops would likely result in full military conflict with Turkey. Ankara is similarly restrained, however, since open military action against ISIS would no doubt precipitate a retaliatory attack against the besieged enclave.

Second, Turkish policymakers are concerned that the country's expansive 510-mile border with Syria could become a reverse conduit for ISIS forces to enter Turkey. Ankara opened the frontier to Syrian refugees in early 2011 and to rebel fighters later that year. Since then, the border has become merely a line on paper. Most of it runs across flat terrain -- there are no physical barriers such as mountains, rivers, or lakes for nearly three-fourths of its expanse. Syrian rebels have taken advantage of this terrain and Turkey's lax policy to crisscross the border and establish smuggling networks to move people and weapons. The situation is now a grave concern for Ankara because an estimated 400-1,000 Turks are known to have joined ISIS as foreign fighters in Syria; the terrorist group appears to be recruiting in large Turkish cities and has reportedly set up cells in Turkish provinces near the border.

TURKEY'S PRIORITIES IN SYRIA

In addition to combatting ISIS, Turkey has three priorities in Syria that are not immediately shared by the United States. Washington will need to keep these objectives in mind if it hopes to secure broader Turkish military commitment against ISIS.

Limiting further refugee flows. Since 2011, the number of Syrians entering Turkey to escape the Assad regime has reached 1.5 million. And following the September 18 ISIS assault on the Kurdish-controlled Kobani border enclave, another 150,000 Syrians crossed over. The refugees are mostly concentrated in Turkey's southern provinces, where they constitute around 20 percent of the population. Thus far, Ankara has cared for them with little international support, spending more than $3 billion over the past three years. These efforts deserve additional praise from Washington.

The influx of refugees has created social and economic pressures, especially in southern provinces such as Kahramanmaras and Gaziantep, which have recently witnessed riots against the emigres' continued presence. Because the refugees are unlikely to repatriate in the short to medium term, Turkey has proposed other measures to alleviate the domestic tensions -- namely, creating safe havens inside Syria where refugees could be sheltered under a no-fly zone. As Washington attempts to secure more cooperation against ISIS, Ankara will use this idea as a bargaining chip.

Ousting the Assad regime. Since 2011, Turkey's priority has been to defeat the Assad regime. Accordingly, Ankara has allowed fighters with various political affiliations, including radicals, to cross into Syria. Turkey did not aim to assist the radicals -- rather, it believed that the radicals were a necessary evil to hasten Bashar al-Assad's fall, and that after his ouster, the moderates would take over and sweep them away. Three years later, however, this strategy has been proven wrong: Assad has not fallen, and radicals are gaining the upper hand among the rebels. Moreover, some of these radicals have joined ISIS, which has directly targeted Turkey by taking over its consulate in Mosul.

Although Ankara has recalibrated its policy somewhat by closing its borders to ISIS activity, it remains intent on

toppling the Assad regime despite Washington's continued indecision on that front. Toward this end, it seeks to maintain support to non-ISIS elements of the Syrian opposition, and it will question any U.S. strategy that weakens ISIS but fails to bolster other rebel factions. Fearing that such an approach by Washington could further entrench the Assad regime, Turkey will continue providing safe haven to non-ISIS rebels, including Ahrar-al Sham and other radical groups. Moreover, it will push the United States to support these elements in order to fill the void left by ISIS before the Assad regime does. Turkey will also likely insist on setting up no-fly zones inside Syria, not only to protect refugees as mentioned above, but also to secure opposition-held areas near the Turkish border.

Subjugating the PKK. In recent years, Turkey has improved its relations with the Iraqi Kurds, developing deep economic and political links built on closer ties with Kurdistan Regional Government leader Masoud Barzani (**see** Policy Focus 122, ***Turkey's Changing Relations with Iraq*** **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-changing-relations-with-iraq-kurdistan-up-baghdad-down)**). After some soul searching, Ankara even began to support the KRG militarily against ISIS in June, when the Iraqi Kurds came under attack.

At home, the Turkish government has entered into peace talks with the PKK, hoping to end its four-decade fight against the group. Yet in July 2012, the PKK -- which has ties to Syrian Kurds through its sister organization, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) -- took control of three Syrian regions along the Turkish border, Afrin, Kobani, and Jazirah, declaring them autonomous cantons.

From Ankara's perspective, peace talks with the PKK must ensure that the group remains weak, and that the Syrian cantons depend on Turkey for survival, since ISIS envelops Kobani and Jazirah to the south and is in the vicinity of Afrin. ISIS forces have viciously targeted the PKK, whose socialist ideology diametrically opposes the jihadists' austere Islamism. To check the PKK's power, Turkey will leave the group with the tough choice of begging assistance from Ankara in order to defend its cantons against ISIS. At the same time, Turkey will rely on its deeper cooperation with the KRG and Barzani, asking the Iraqi Kurds to leverage their networks in Syria against those of the PKK.

In the end, though, Turkey will not allow ISIS to overrun the PKK cantons, in part because they provide a buffer for more than half of the long border with Syria. Accordingly, Ankara will work with Washington to prevent an ISIS takeover there. At the same time, it will object to any flow of U.S. weapons to the PKK to ensure that the group's position at the negotiating table remains weak. Short of a comprehensive settlement with the PKK, Ankara fears that any weapons given to the group to fight ISIS now could one day be used against Turkey. Instead, Turkey will fall back on the measures described above: forcing the PKK to request Turkish assistance, and encouraging the KRG's primacy among Syrian Kurds.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

Turkey's Syria policy is awash with confusing and often conflicting priorities. Ankara will not support a U.S. policy that degrades ISIS without targeting the Assad regime. Nor will it wholeheartedly embrace a strategy that fails to strengthen the non-ISIS elements of the Syrian opposition. Rather, Turkey will work with opposition factions -- including U.S.-designated terrorist groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra -- while also opposing any U.S. measures that boost the PKK. From Ankara's perspective, any strategy that degrades ISIS alone would embolden Assad, while weakening Assad alone would embolden the PKK. Accordingly, Turkish policy is to degrade ISIS and Assad alike while also subjugating the PKK.

In Iraq, Turkey will seek to bolster its ties with the KRG as leverage against the PKK and ISIS. It may also work with Barzani to enhance his influence among the Kurds in northern Syria, even though such a policy risks fostering a Kurdish entity straddling internationally recognized borders.

To be sure, Erdogan's recent pivot to the United States will help iron out some of these policy differences. Turkey will undoubtedly continue to provide Washington with support on logistics and intelligence operations against ISIS in

Syria, and it will remain forthcoming on humanitarian relief efforts. Yet securing a deeper, longer-term Turkish commitment to combat ISIS will depend on how well Washington can triangulate Ankara's approach to the Assad regime, the non-ISIS opposition, and the PKK/KRG.

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)** *(Potomac Books).* ❖

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