

# Turkey's Jihadi Dilemma

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## The endgame in Syria might be a weak state with jihadists left roaming around, so Turkey should work more closely with allies to monitor the situation.

In late May, the Turkish government uncovered a plan to use Sarin gas as part of a potential bomb attack in southern Turkey. Al Qaeda's branch in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), was allegedly behind the plot, and the subsequent arrests highlighted the increasing trouble jihadi radicals could pose for Ankara. Indeed, the longer Turkey turns a blind eye to jihadi rebels crossing its territory into Syria, the more likely there will be blowback.

The reality is that providing jihadists access to a neighboring country can result in unintended consequences as radicals ultimately bite the hand that feeds them, something Pakistan should have learned over Afghanistan, and Bashar al-Assad has discovered as Syria-backed al Qaeda elements from Iraqi territory have turned against the regime in Damascus.

True, Turkey lacks the vulnerabilities of Syria and Pakistan -- the country is a democracy and a majority middle class society, so it does not have the social and economic problems so often conducive to jihadist radicalization. Nor does Turkey have a homegrown jihadist tradition. Foreigners, not Turkish citizens, carried out the 2003 Istanbul bombings that targeted the British consulate, the headquarters of a Turkish bank and two synagogues. Indeed, few Turks have demonstrated a taste for jihad, and its appeal has not been as great as in some parts of the Arab world.

However, with jihadist radicalization taking root in Syria, there are some troubling anecdotal signs that some Turks

are reaching out to recruiters in an effort to take up the cause. For example, a cook at a luxury hotel in Istanbul erroneously contacted Jihadology.net, which is managed by one of the authors, asking for help to become a jihadi fighter (jihadology.net is actually a clearinghouse of information on the issue). Turkish officials, meanwhile, have also spoken to us of a group of Turkish citizens of Chechen origin who previously fought against Russia, but who have crossed into Syria recently to join the fighting there.

While it's true that the language barrier between Turks and Arabs might limit large scale jihadist recruitment of Turks, Syrian or foreign jihadists could still recruit Sunni Arab citizens in Turkey that mostly live in Urfa Province, which borders Syria's al-Raqqa Governorate. This area lies just across from a Syrian zone that opposition rebels, including JN, have freed from regime control.

And jihadist radicalization poses yet another threat as Turkey increasingly becomes a staging ground for the facilitation and smuggling of foreign nationals, including jihadists, into northern Syria to fight the al-Assad regime. This is not because Ankara supports the jihadist cause. Rather, Turkey is calculating that al-Assad will fall, and the "good guys" will take power. Ankara therefore sees jihadists as a tool whose fighting power could precipitate the fall of the al-Assad regime.

But, what if Assad's regime does not fall, or Syria is not taken over by forces acceptable to Ankara? Turkey's government does not seem to have considered the more likely scenario, one in which Syria slowly collapses into a weak and divided state split between al-Assad and his opponents, including JN.

If this should occur, Turkey would face a jihadist threat on its doorstep, across a 540- mile border that stretches along mostly flat terrain. Ankara has provided the Syrian rebels with a safe haven on its territory, a policy that has already rendered the physically unchallenging border essentially moot: in most places, one can simply drive across the border without obstacles.

Sadly, even only a few radical fighters could pose a threat. In mid-June, a jihadist in Syria from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, whose accent suggested that he is an ethnic Arab and college-educated Turkish citizen, released a video on YouTube calling on all Turks to take "arms against all injustices wherever they are." Moreover, any transnational attacks that emanate from Syria would likely see plotters traveling through Turkey, Syria's only neighbor, which acts as a conduit between the Middle East, Europe and beyond.

Following the Reyhanli bombings, Turkey has tightened its borders and the country's law enforcement are paying special attention to possible JN moves from Turkey into Syria. But Ankara must do more, and Turkey should cooperate more closely with allies to monitor the situation.

And if Washington really wants to help? Well, it could make clearer to Turkey's leadership that the endgame in Syria might be a weak state scenario with "bad guys" left roaming around. Ankara could quickly regret kicking the Syria can down the road.

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